

*Pavel Nifin*

# CRUELTY

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**CRUELTY**

I remember Uzelkov just as we saw him when he first appeared in the charge room.

He was a skinny little fellow in a grey hareskin hat and flashy dog-fur coat; a canvas brief-case was tucked under his arm. He turned up around mid-day, showed his press card of the gubernia newspaper and demanded rather than asked for something worth-while. "Worth-while" were the words he used.

The cases we had on hand were not good enough for him.

"Is that all? A lot of thefts! I'd like something really. . . ." And he clicked his tongue to show us the sort of thing he wanted.

I thought, at first, that he would like to hear about all sorts of tricksters, confidence men, card-sharpers and cheats, and fetched our "picture gallery." But he hardly looked at them.

"I'm not Cesare Lombroso," he told me. "What do I care about mugs!"

He had a curious habit of wiggling his ears.

Those were big ears he had—the flapping kind that are sometimes called musical. They always wiggled slightly when he was nervous or excited, we noticed afterwards; and they were not the sort of ears that went well with his bird-like head and fleshy nose.

His nose should really have belonged to a general or a thinker. On Uzelkov it looked grotesque. Perhaps he was aware of this. Perhaps he felt that

his nose, his ears and the puny figure he cut prevented anyone taking him seriously and for that reason was always trying to show that he didn't take anyone seriously either.

I've long noticed that those who are stuck-up or are arrogant, truculent or even bellicose for no obvious reason are more often than not people with an inferiority complex.

I would not say, of course, that Uzelkov was quite that sort. Why should I lay it on so thick? Someone might think I had a grudge against him and was trying to get even after all these years. No, I am only doing my best to set things down just as they were. And if I've started my tale with Uzelkov, with the day he turned up in our charge room, it is only because all sorts of things happened precisely after he appeared.

But, of course, no one could have foreseen those events at that time.

And so Uzelkov kept pacing up and down the room, trumpeting into an enormous handkerchief and twitching his shoulders.

"If you'd give me some facts, some solid facts, I'd do the rest myself. I'd like to make a splash in the Sunday edition. Haven't you got anything spicy?"

"Perhaps you'd like something on fake doctors?" Kolya Solovyov suggested. "They've been crippling a lot of people lately! Couldn't you turn the heat on them in your paper?"

"I used to write about the quacks when I was in Kulominsk uyezd," he said. "And it's not my line anyway. What do you think I am: a worker-or peasant-correspondent? I deal with big things only. That's what I came for."

"I think I know what you want," said Venka Malyshev. "Just a minute!"

We were eager to oblige a representative of the gubernia press who had come to our uyezd town of Dudari for the first time. As old guide books will tell you, our town is situated in picturesque surroundings, but is of difficult access to tourists. To get to Dudari from the gubernia town, one had to travel by boat, train and horse carts, a journey that took at least five days. Not every man would risk such a trip, knowing that bandits might fall upon him anywhere along the way.

There were bandits aplenty about in the early twenties. There were even generals among them—"White" generals who had been defeated in the Civil War—though the bands in our uyezd had run out of generals and colonels. They had been mauled pretty badly by a special detachment of the OGPU which had already moved on towards the Pacific coast.

There were only a few depleted bands still operating around Dudari. But not depleted enough to enable us to write such reports as: "The night passed without incident." We had forgotten what a night without incident was like in Dudari uyezd. Even quiet days were few and far between.

The taiga around the town teemed with bands who were constantly murdering our active supporters among the peasants, raiding the co-oper.



atives, robbing people on the highways and never missing the chance of instigating the population against the new authorities, to stir up the peasants and draw as many of them as they could into their ranks. Travelling was a dangerous affair in those days.

So anyone who had risked a visit to our town was something of a hero to be welcomed with open arms, especially so a newspaper reporter. We were only sorry he had turned up when we were having one of our brief lulls.

It was winter. Even such a desperate bandit ataman as Kostya Vorontsov, the son of a kulak, an ex-lieutenant of Kolchak's army and self-styled "Emperor of all of the taiga," had withdrawn to the woods and burrowed in the deep snow with his bands, postponing his murders, robberies, arson and other affairs till a better season.

It was harder for them to operate in winter when there was no tall grass and wind-blown tangles of twigs to conceal footprints and even the tracks of horses as in spring and summer. Such atamans as Zlotnikov, Klochkov and Vekshegonov also kept well away in winter, leaving the towns and villages to small gangs of filchers, hawks, prigs, swindlers, petty cheats, shoplifters and other small fry.

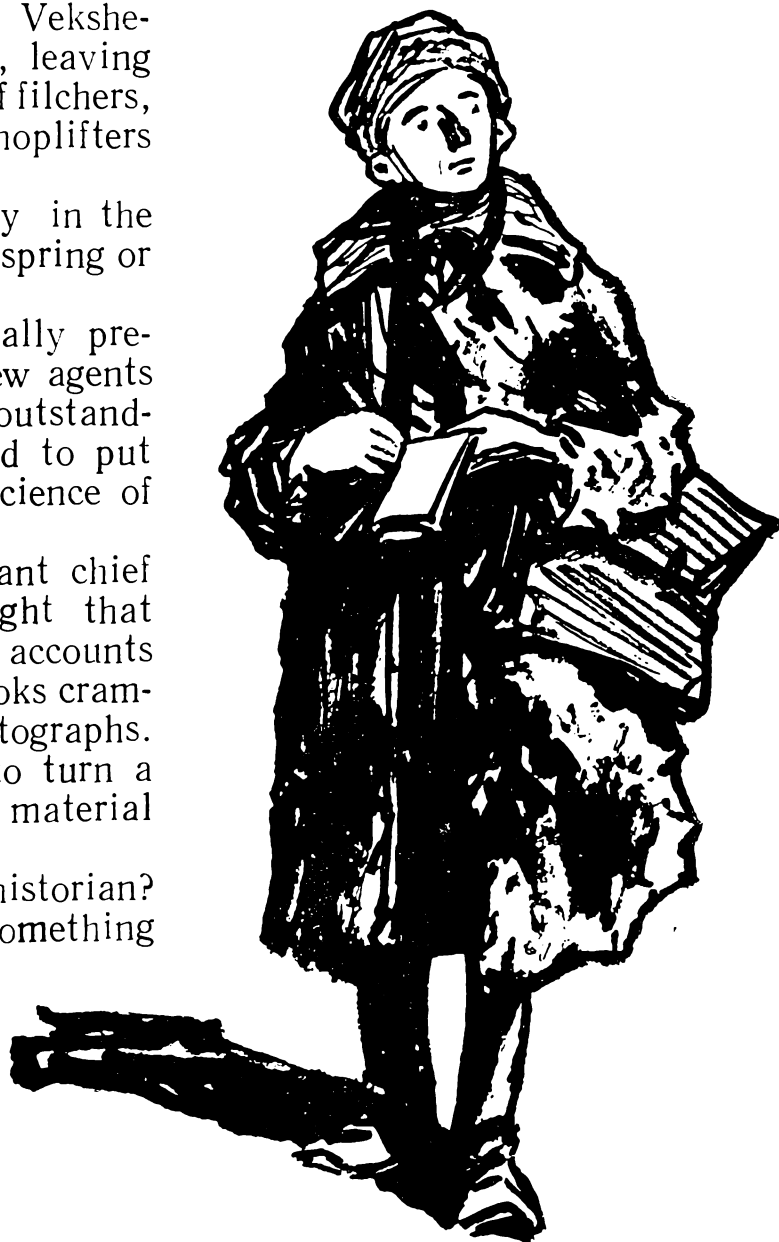
Our work was not exactly easy in the winter, but not quite as hard as in the spring or summer.

In the cold season we were usually preparing for the spring, contacting new agents and recording detailed accounts of outstanding events which, as our chief liked to put it, were of certain interest for the science of criminology.

Veniamin Malyshev, the assistant chief for the secret operative section, thought that the correspondent would find these accounts interesting and produced two copy-books crammed with cases, diagrams and photographs. Uzelkov, however, did not trouble to turn a single page, but just sniffed at the material and smiled.

"What do you take me for? An historian? Haven't you got something better? Something that would. . . ." And here he clicked his tongue again.

We did not like that clicking of his tongue. We hadn't said anything the first time he did it, but now Venka Malyshev was fed up:



"Look here! Do you think people get murdered every day? What do you think we're here for?"

"How do I know what you're here for?" said Uzelkov with that same exasperating sniff and smile. "But I've come to write up the freshest and, as far as possible, the most entertaining facts in an entertaining manner. Unfortunately I have to think of my readers, first and foremost, and they want facts that are fresh."

We didn't like this either.

The reporter did not look any older than we—seventeen, or nineteen at the most. It was humiliating. Who did he think he was?

He seemed so independent and sure of himself in that dog coat and hareskin hat and kept fastening and unfastening his brief-case with such aplomb that none of us had the nerve to put him in his place.

He was back again on the next day, rooting through our bulletins, wrinkling his nose at the results, jotting down notes, chewing his pencil and sighing like a man with a secret sorrow. There really was a shade of sadness in those bird eyes watery from the frost, the harsh light or some other cause.

Some of the things we had on hand did appeal to him after all. He was in fact so pleased that he pulled out a few cigarettes wrapped in a scrap of newspaper and handed them around. Even a thief who sat despondently on a bench in the charge room got a smoke.

After a half hour's talk, he condescended to tell us that though his real surname was Uzelkov, and his first name Yakov, he signed his articles as Yakuz. For some reason, too, he wanted to know whether or not we were Party members. He kept coming to see us every day after that.

The rules were strict in the criminal investigation department and one of them called for courtesy to all and sundry, be they criminals or witnesses. The rules were observed, and yet we had the impression that our visitors often grew timid. It was natural enough. To be frank even we were a little afraid because no one was to expect leniency and anybody could slip up, exceed his authority or break the rules or something, and find himself behind the bars.

Our chief, an ex-circus man who had lost a couple of ribs and three fingers of his left hand in the Civil War and somehow found himself in Siberia, was fond of quiet and order more than anything. He kept repeating on every possible occasion: "What do the authorities expect from us? The authorities expect us to be efficient! What are we supposed to be? We're supposed to be a special organization! What sort of an organization? An organ of Soviet power! What does that mean? That means that everything should be in order!"

Another of his fond lectures was: "Never forget that stupidity is the most expensive thing there is! Ponder this well all of you! You can't expect me to shove everything into your heads! Every man must think for himself. And what is needed for that? Quiet, of course!" He would eye us severely over his horn rims and add: "Is everything clear?"

Most of us, as it happened, were young people, and the chief with his long chequered career felt responsible for our upbringing.

Stupidity, he argued, was the most horrible of vices and he could never warn us enough, citing his own example, insisting that he had lost his ribs and fingers through stupidity alone.

"I was in too great a hurry, wanted to be smarter than the rest. Which is also superfluous! Everything should have its time, place and order."

And the principal mark of order, our chief would repeat, was silence. And it was especially quiet, therefore, in the dark, narrow passage receding into the depths of the building and ending in his office, a large room partitioned in two: the reception room and the office proper.

We used to tip-toe up and down that carpet in the passage, filled with respect for the extraordinary personality of our chief and our own important duties.

But there was not a scrap of shyness in Yakuz, *alias* Yakov Uzelkov. He came to the station as though he lived there, shed his dog fur in the vestibule, announced his presence with clarion blasts into his handkerchief and stalked into the charge room hugging his hat and brief-case.

In the mornings, both thieves and witnesses sat waiting their turn on a green, wrought-iron garden bench in the passage and there was generally an air of patient suffering about them, as in a dentist's waiting room.

Warming himself a bit at the stove, Uzelkov would then stroll into the passage and involve both thieves and witnesses in lengthy talk, something that was strictly forbidden. But what did he care about our rules? He would only remark that even at the gubernia station, a good deal larger than ours, he assured us, the rules were not so stringent.

He liked to create the impression that he could get to see anyone he chose, mentioning such important figures at the gubernia station as Zhur and Voro-beichik whom we knew by their renown alone. He even hinted that they were his friends, something that we could not, or rather, would not believe.

But he never tried to convince us and talked to us in a casual way, ironically, with his eyes elsewhere.

"That fat-face reminds me of Gargantua," Uzelkov commented one day when we had hauled in a fat profiteer suspected of theft.

"Who is Gargantua?" I asked.

"Don't you know?" He seemed surprised and pained. "Well, you wouldn't of course. He's from François Rabelais."

We had never heard of him either, but felt too awkward to ask more questions. His education was putting us out of countenance.

He would sometimes come so early that the reports were not yet typed and Venka himself had to hunt out the important events for him.

"Well, put down what I say," Venka urged Uzelkov one morning, while leafing through the fat book of reports borrowed from the man on duty. "A retreating armed band of eight raided the co-operative store in the village of Vesylaya Podorvikha about 9 p.m. yesterday."

But Uzelkov's shoulders were twitching again. "Don't bother dictating. I'm no schoolboy. Just tell me what it was all about. I'll write it in my own way." Venka then told him what it was all about and Uzelkov quickly jotted down everything. Still, we had the feeling that he was not at all writing "what it was all about."

Our suspicions were justified. Ordinary facts from our book of reports were often distorted beyond recognition.

He wrote something like this: "A suspicious rustle came to the ears of the watchman in the late hours. The sky was overcast, and he could just make out the silhouettes of the riders against the dark velvet of the night."

To tell the truth, I liked Yakuz's manner of writing. The irritating thing was that it wasn't true. There had been neither riders nor clouds. The bandits had come on foot. There had been a watchman, but fast asleep.

Venka Malyshev, Kolya Solovyov and the other boys were as annoyed with Uzelkov as I, but he didn't seem to mind and kept asking for fresh copy. Soon, he had a real windfall.

## 2

Senior Militiaman Semyon Vorobyov reported at midday in a heavy snow-storm, or I should say, in a blizzard which had begun the night before. He was covered with snow.

"Klochkov's band has come out of the forest and is somewhere along the highway," he said.

That was the last thing we would have expected in the winter.

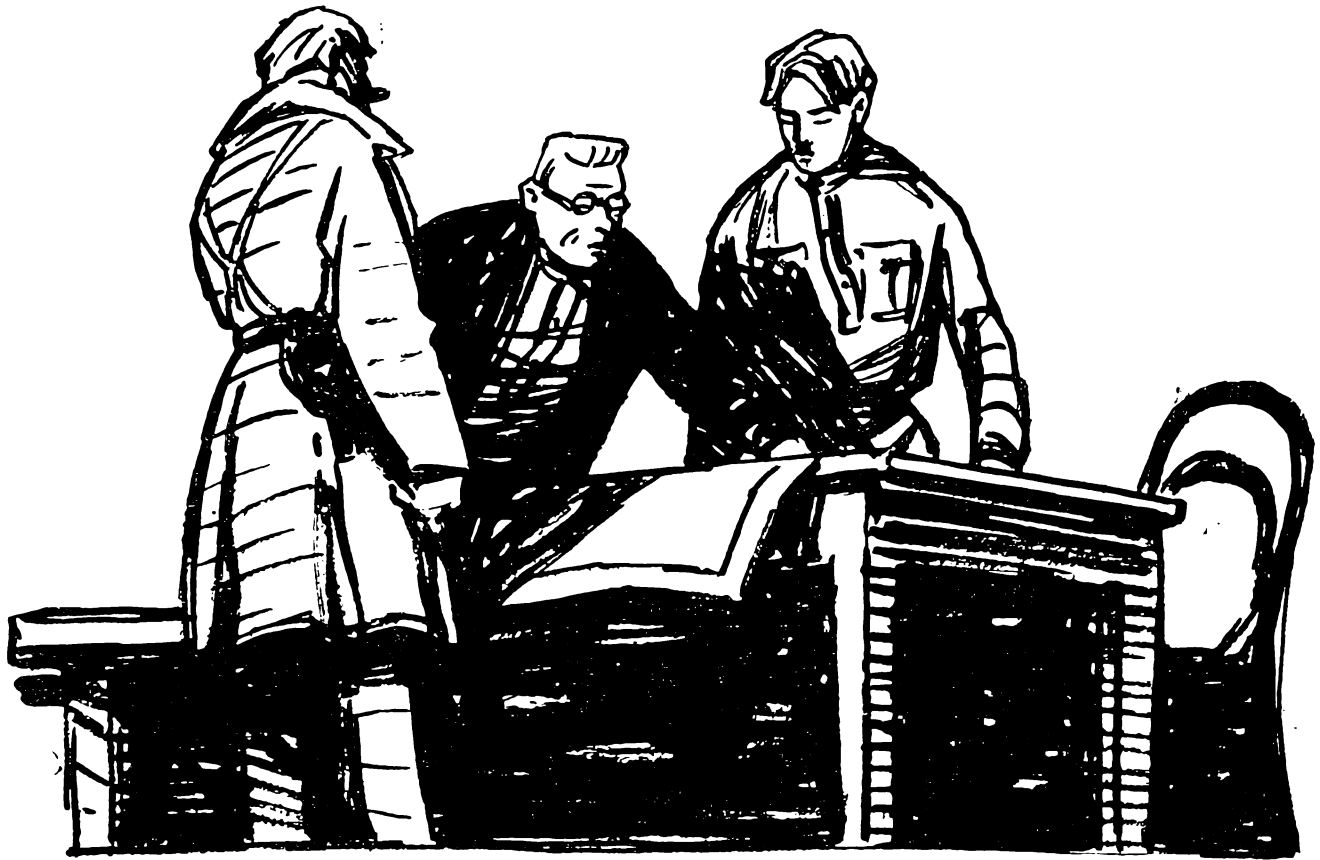
The band had taken cover near Marevaya Zaimka, between the Buyer and Revyaka rivers where the Utulik highway forks. They had ambushed and killed three men of the co-operative in the evening, plundered a few peasant carts and gone on to Zolotaya Pad in spite of the blizzard.

"I decided to report here immediately," said Vorobyov, forcing the wet out of his hair with a large-toothed comb. "I thought you ought to know about it at once."

"But that was yesterday! Where have you been all this time?" Our chief's eyebrows met truculently and it looked as if he were going to butt the answer out of the militiaman with his grey bristling pate.

"Where have I been?" Vorobyov admired himself in the mirror. "Riding around my beat as usual. And it's a big one too! The lecturer once told us that you could put two—what do you call them—Switzerlands into my beat. And it's full of bandits and illicit distillers of vodka, as you know. Please remember that I haven't got a hundred hands."

"I see," said the chief, adjusting his spectacles more firmly over his ears. Forgetting Vorobyov, he took the map from the wall. "Klochkov has apparently taken a chance in the blizzard, thinking the snow will cover his tracks. How stupid. . . . Look, Malyshev! I'll be just here in forty minutes." He jabbed the spot on the map. "And you bring your men to this point." He



screwed his finger into the map at another place. "Don't interfere with anyone without my instructions. I'll tell the military school trainees to support us from this direction." He shifted his finger. "The main thing is to prevent Klochkov from getting out of Zolotaya Pad. Sound enough?"

"I think. . . ."

"Never mind what you think! Is it sound or not?"

"It's sound, all right."

"Then go ahead! But mind: don't do anything on your own. If the band makes off, just note the direction. That'll be the thing to do."

By evening the operation was over.

I was just going on night duty when they brought in seven arrested men and eight who had been killed at Zolotaya Pad.

Yevlampi Klochkov, the ataman of the band, an ex-staff captain of Kolchak's army, was dead, as well as his fifteen-year-old auxiliary Zubok whom he had picked up somewhere on the roads of the Civil War as a little boy.

The corpses were dumped in the dark courtyard pending identification and lay about like logs in the snow near the brick shed with the barred windows. I went out to have a look at them with a "barn" lantern. Venka Malyshov had come out too and examined the dead for a long time. In his heavy coat thrown over his shoulders and Mongolian foxskin hat, he looked like a night watchman. His walk too reminded one of a night watchman half frozen—slow and shuffling.

"How did things go?" I asked.

"Stupidly! Just see what that lunatic Iosif Golubchik has done," he answered, nodding at the corpses.

I knew that Venka did not like Golubchik. Still, I could not see why he should be angry now.

"Did Golubchik kill the lot?" I asked in surprise, playing the light on the dead.

"No," said Venka. "Kolya Solovyov picked off Klochkov. And I think I did for this one." He prodded the body with his foot. "The rest were shot by the military school trainees."

"And what about Golubchik?"

Venka did not answer, but bent over the body of Zubok.

The youth lay in the snow in a smart black cape lined with grey Astrakhan. His fur boots were beautifully embroidered. The hat was gone, but his blond hair was neatly parted even now. He must have lost his hat just before he fell and the hair was unruffled.

"See where he hit him?"

Venka unfastened the dead boy's cape. "Right through the heart! That dirty pig had no business shooting down a boy."

So it was Golubchik who had killed Zubok.

"It's hard to pick and choose in a scuffle like that," I objected. "You've got to shoot quickly or be killed yourself."

"Nonsense!" Venka took the lantern from me. "We could have taken Zubok alive. Do you remember what happened at the saw-mill last autumn? I nearly caught him on the roof, even knocked the carbine out of his hands. No one thought he would jump from the roof, from the second floor. And that's what he did—without hesitation. He was a brave boy. He would have been killed but for the sawdust. I saw him pick himself up and run away. I watched it all from the roof: he got away, only limping a little."

"What was the good of him if he was mixed up with the bandits?" I objected. "Klochkov taught him well, you know."

"Klochkov was a complete rotter," said Venka regarding the ataman's corpse. "We could have made a man of that boy."

"Don't be so sure!"

"Why, you're crazy!" Venka looked at me surprised and was about to add something when Golubchik appeared on the porch. Tall, lean, round-shouldered and wearing a leather jacket much too short for him, he came up, flicking the snow from his boots with his riding crop. He was followed closely by little Yakov Uzelkov, the folds of his coat flying, a notebook in his hand and a pencil clenched in his teeth.

"Admiring the job?" asked Golubchik, and though it was dark we could feel that he was smiling.

We did not answer.

Uzelkov removed the pencil from his mouth.

"Which is Klochkov?"

Golubchik took the lantern from Venka and turned the light on the bulky form of the ataman.



"They say he was too heavy for an ordinary horse," Golubchik laughed. "He had a special animal of his own, as huge as a dray horse. Too bad we had to shoot it. The carcass is in Zolotaya Pad."

"And who was his auxiliary?" asked Uzelkov.

"That's him, over there." The light shifted to Zubok.

"Your work?" Uzelkov looked at him and returned the pencil to his teeth.

"That's right." Golubchik laughed again.

Venka Malyshev stood somewhat aside, motionless.

For a moment, I thought something was going to happen. Venka was bound to say something to Golubchik and there would be a quarrel, but just then, our medical man Polyakov came out of the dark.

"I've been looking for you." He seized Venka's sleeve. "It's time I changed your bandage."

So Venka had been wounded. That was why he had huddled himself in his coat so.

"Were you badly hit? Where?"

"It's nothing," he grunted. "Just a scratch on the shoulder near the neck. I lost a lot of blood before they bandaged me though."

Venka followed Polyakov to the tiny dispensary next to the bath-house.

"Veniamin!" Uzelkov shouted after him. "I want to talk to you afterwards. I'd like to know some of the details."

"You'll make them up yourself!" Venka answered. "You always do!"

Guarded by a militiaman, the seven prisoners, shaggy, unshaven peasants in sheepskins and huge ice-stiffened boots of the sort worn by the water carriers of old, sat side by side on the green garden bench in the passage.

I had them brought into the charge room one by one for preliminary inquiries, filling special forms with their names, ages, nationalities, birth places and other relevant data.

They were not reluctant to answer, asked for something to smoke, sat leisurely scratching themselves and filling the room with the odour of wet, home-made sheepskins. Only a few hours back they had been a blind, relentless force, but now they looked like tired cabmen gathered to spend a night at a highway inn. It was difficult to feel hostility for them.

I lost my temper only once, when the militiaman brought in an elderly, but still powerful peasant with a bristling red beard from which an upturned nose with nervously dilating nostrils protruded; his little bear-like eyes were shot with fury.

"Your name?"

"What?"

"What's your name?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"That's none of your business. I'm doing the questioning. Sit down!"

"Don't mind if I do."



He sat down so heavily that the chair groaned.

"What's your name?"

"My name?"

"Yes, yours! Stop playing the fool! We'll knock the foolishness out of you if need be!"

"Quite a man, aren't you." He laughed hoarsely, coughed, spat on the floor and covered the spot with his boot. "You're still wet behind the ears! Just a lout! Think you can scare me? What if I got my hands on that," he nodded at the cast-iron ash-tray, "and bashed you over the head?"

I drew the ash-tray to my elbow.

"Being careful?" The red beard laughed. "That's right! God takes care of those who take care of themselves!"

I got up: "Are you going to tell me your name or not?"

"Are you really trying to frighten me?" The red beard got up too. "Go ahead and try! I'd like to see!"

Kolya Solovyov entered from the adjoining room. His cheek was swollen; he had a toothache, but could not get away because the chief wanted everyone present at the discussion of the operation.

"What are you so rumbustious about, red beard?" Kolya began in a quiet voice. "We've untied you, thinking you were a sensible man, and there you go getting on your hind feet again."

"He's anxious to join the ataman," I nodded towards the window. "He's in a hurry to get to the next world too."

"You're a couple of lousy pups!" He looked at us with hatred. "And to think that they pay good money to the likes of you!" He sank into the chair and closed his eyes: he did not want to see us, let alone talk to us.

Venka Malyshev looked in at the door.

"Did the chief call?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"Where are you going to put them?"

"Number eight."

"Is it empty?"

"Yes."

Venka entered the room and took a seat on the bench near the red beard. "Well, old 'un? Thinking it over?"

The red beard raised his eyes, this time with curiosity, as if trying to place the speaker.

The chief entered the room, walking inaudibly in his thick fur high-boots. "Get through with this quickly and come to the office," he said, reaching for the key in the glass case on the wall. "We'll have a talk. Call Golubchik and Begunok too."

He did not even look at the prisoner; and just what he meant by "getting through" was not at all clear.

He paused in the doorway.

"How's your shoulder, Malyshev?"

"It's all right." Venka half-rose.

But I could see that it was not "all right" at all. His face was bluish and seemed leaner than usual, there were circles under his eyes.

"What's the matter with your jaw?" the chief turned to Solovyov.

"I've got a slight toothache." Kolya tried to smile.

"It's a real hospital we have here!" The chief was displeased. "And why is that man here?" He looked at the prisoner.

"He doesn't want to speak. He's even forgotten his name."

"Perhaps he's too frightened to talk." The chief strode to the prisoner and barked: "Get up!"

The prisoner did not budge.

"Get up! Who do you think I'm talking to?" he shouted again.

The red beard slowly raised his head, his eyes blazing.

"Why, you fat swine," he drawled. "First see if you can harness me and then yell: 'Git up!'"

"Put him in the corner cell; in solitary and don't let him have anything to eat until he says who he is and tells us all the rest."

The chief slammed the door so hard that the spring which held it to was set whining.

"You should have got up," reproached Venka. "He's our chief, you know."

"He may be your chief, the chief of the stooges, but not mine!"

"There, there, tune down! Don't forget where you are! And never mind the name. I'll look it up in a moment and tell you just who you are." Venka put on his Mongol hat and rose to go, when the prisoner showed real interest for the first time.

"Hold on," he said. "Were you in Zolotaya Pad too?"

"Yes."

"Today?"

"So what?"

"The devil's had a hand in it I'm sure!" Red beard seemed sorely disappointed. "You were so near when I fired! I took good aim at your head-piece. At that hat you're wearing now! Can't see how I could have missed. Has anyone else a hat like his?" he turned to all of us.

Oddly enough, it was he who was doing the questioning and not we.

No one had a hat like Venka's. So it was this man who had wounded him! He had confessed it, hadn't he? But he would not tell us his name.

"A vicious devil, isn't he," said Kolya Solovyov taking his hand from his throbbing cheek. "We ought to send you on to join the ataman! That's his corpse out there on the snow."

"We'll all be lying out there," said the prisoner dryly. "You too! Vorontsov will make you pay for Yevlampi Grigoryevich Klochkov. Mark my words, Vorontsov will never forgive that! You'll be called to account for my soul as well. And your chief, that grey swine, too! You'll have something to weep about soon, you bitches' sons, the lot of you!"

We had never heard anyone talk that way in our charge room. There were some who had fumed and cursed or pounced on the man on duty—one of our men was even hurt with an iron weight—but no one had ever dared to challenge the entire station that way. Did he really think that Vorontsov and his band were stronger than we? Or was he just bluffing?

Yakov Uzelkov thrust his head through the door: "May I come in?"

"You may not!" said Venka and went out into the passage to reprimand the men on guard. What business had they to let strangers in at such a time!

"But I'm not a stranger," shouted Uzelkov. "I'm a member of the press."

"The members of the press can come in the morning," Venka retorted.

He passed through the courtyard to the jail and was soon back, ready to tell the red beard his name.

"Your name really means something to me," he said with a faint smile.

"You're a sort of godfather to me now because you've baptized me with fire. You missed my head, thank God, but clipped my shoulder; and I ought to remember your name for all time, Lazar Baukin."

"Remember it if you like," said the red beard, but refused to answer our questions as before, and I had to send him to the solitary corner as the chief had ordered.

### 3

When the conference was over, Venka went home. It was after one o'clock in the morning. He was already back when I was relieved in the early hours.

Yakov Uzelkov arrived in the charge room around the same time and Venka told him all about the operation of the day before, advising him to question Kolya Solovyov as well.

"When you've finished, show your copy to one of us," he concluded.

"Just to make sure that you get everything right. This is a serious matter."

Yakov Uzelkov assured him that he would let his pen be guided only by his own artistic conscience and, having consulted two others at the station, went home to write his story.

It was published several days later in the gubernia paper *Znamya Truda*. According to Uzelkov's version we had all displayed great courage: our chief and Kolya Solovyov, Iosif Golubchik and Veniamin Malyshev.

The story featured Malyshev as "a young Comsomol with blazing eyes who had performed wonders of heroism."

Then came a full description of the "wonders." Venka Malyshev had allegedly been the first to attack the band and had been reinforced in the nick of time by Nikolai Solovyov who had shot the ataman Klochkov, and Iosif Golubchik who had mortally wounded the ataman's desperate auxiliary.

There was no mention of the fact that the desperate auxiliary had been fifteen years old.

"I'll flay that Yakuz alive, if I get my hands on him," Venka promised. "They'll be saying it was I who told him all this. He's made me look quite an idiot in his story. 'Blazing eyes!'"

As ill luck would have it, Yakuz failed to turn up at our station for several days. He had gone to Beryozovka to cover the reconstruction of the sawmill, the biggest in Siberia, as he wrote later. Superlatives were his special weakness: everything was the largest, the unprecedented, the most outstanding. To be more exact, that was the impression created by his articles: everything that he described had to be unusual, had to have happened for the first time in history and be something that the world had never heard about.

I would not say that we missed him exactly. We were too busy. We kept cross-examining the members of Klochkov's band day after day. We hoped to get a clue from them as to the whereabouts of Kostya Vorontsov who was hiding somewhere in the snows of the Voyevodsky Forest.

Vorontsov's band was our main objective, as our chief liked to remind us.

Venka Malyshev had picked four of the prisoners and never parted with them. The only thing he did not do was to invite them to his house. Otherwise one might have thought they were his best friends. He called them by their first names—Stepan, Kiryukha, Lazar—and fed them with his rations of tinned meat. Twice, he even treated Lazar Baukin to a swig of home-brew—something altogether proscribed by the rules.

The barrel of home-brew seized from the tar distillers in Bely Kamen stood locked up in a special niche beside the big safe, waiting for chemical analysis. This was delayed for some reason and there were a few of us who were making the best of the situation.

Venka, too, drew some of the liquor to treat his prisoner, though he had criticized those who had tapped the barrel first.

"I've got to have it in line of duty," he told me, justifying himself. "Lazar's hoarse and coughing all the time, and those powders that Polyakov prescribed don't seem to do any good at all. Lazar doesn't believe in doctors anyway, says he won't recognize them."

"There was nothing surprising in the fact that Lazar Baukin did not think much of doctors, but what did surprise me was that Venka should take such pains with him. What did he think this was? A hospital for bandits who had caught cold or just a pub serving free drinks?"

I was annoyed, to say the least.

But later, we all got the surprise of our lives when such an embittered and sullen man as Lazar Baukin, who had seemed to hate everyone and everybody,

began to co-operate with us only three days after his arrest; though the chief's order to keep him hungry had not been carried out.

True, his evidence was still vague. I read his initial statements and told Venka that the brute was foxing the trail.

"Well, what do you expect him to do? To come to you and make a clean breast of it?" Venka retorted. "Not on your sweet life! He's not that sort of a fellow."

I had the feeling that Venka almost admired this "fellow."

I was curious and wanted to see how Lazar Baukin actually bore himself under the questioning and on one occasion paid a visit to the secret operative department.

When I came in, Venka looked up surprised.

"Is there anything you want?"

"No, I just wanted to sit here for a while."

"You can go and sit somewhere else. We're having a serious talk and want no witnesses."

I went back to my room.

Venka came in to see me in an hour.

"Would you like to see the testimony Baukin gave today?" he suggested—probably hoping to soften the effect of his rudeness. "He's an unusual fellow, that Baukin."

"Why should I?" I countered. "I'm not that curious. You're handling the interrogation and it's no concern of mine."

"Don't be silly!" Venka objected. "Everything concerns us. We're all responsible for everything no matter who handles what. And Lazar is no ordinary fellow, I tell you."

"What makes you think so?"

"Everything! He's a tar distiller and hunter like his father and grandfather before him. He knows the taiga inside out."

"But he's a bandit now."

"You're telling me. He's an interesting type just the same. His head's stuffed with all sorts of rot, but he's not really stupid. Do you know what he said today? 'If the Siberian peasants do not take to the new power, it won't keep for anything in the world. It may hang on for another five years or ten, but it will have to go eventually. The peasants didn't like Alexander Vasilyevich Kolchak and his foreigners and that's why they broke down. You can't get anything done by force alone, no matter how you try.'"

"Well, what's so bright about that?" I wanted to know. "He must be a real counter-revolutionary to compare Kolchak with Soviet power."

"I suppose you're right broadly speaking," Venka reflected. "But you've got to take a few things into account. He springs from a family of tar makers and hunters, but suddenly gets mixed up with bandits."

"But there are plenty of tar makers and hunters among the bandits, aren't there?" I was getting annoyed. "He's not a little boy. What do you mean gets mixed up! He's old enough to know what he's doing, I'm sure."



"You can never tell," said Venka. "Even an old man can get fooled sometimes that he just can't understand things at first."

Venka sincerely believed that all intelligent working people would stand up for Soviet power no matter where they were. And if some of them did not, there was surely a kink in their brains. He was firmly convinced, therefore, that Lazar Baukin had been duped by the Whiteguard officers.

He still had Lazar on his mind when we were having tea late that evening.

"Lazar must be sitting there, in his half-dark corner cell, and thinking and thinking."

"He's asleep long ago, I'm sure. What has he to think about now?"

"No! He's thinking all the time. I see it every day. Doesn't he hate us though!"

"Well, we've got no reason to like him either," I remarked. "He's a bandit if there ever was one!"

"That's true," Venka conceded, "but he's an unusual fellow all the same. 'Your chief's a weak man,' he said to me yesterday. 'What makes you think so?' I wanted to know. 'I can see it, can't I? He's too nervous. Too much yelling. He barked at me so hard last time that his ears turned red. What good is he against the atamans? He's too weak—and too fat.' 'Our chief doesn't have to be an ataman.' I told him. 'This is an office he's in charge of and not a crowd of bandits.' 'Don't tell me that! You've got to have a strong man in charge everywhere, strong enough to make people obey him without raising his voice.'"

I was quite surprised.

"Are those the things you talk about during the interrogation? Do you really let him run our chief down like that?"

"But he's not running him down. He's just taking stock of everything. He notices things. You don't expect me to gag him, do you? I just listen. It's a good thing I got him talking at all."

"Still, I wouldn't talk about the chief with him if I were you. Who is he to talk like that?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out. I'm curious about the man, about all sorts of men. People are different, you know!"

In his harassing job of assistant chief of the secret operative section, Venka had to handle a wide range of material. He had to inspect the scenes of accidents, great and small, to collect intelligence, handle the interrogation, and draft the reports. The thing that absorbed him most at the moment was the interrogation of Lazar Baukin. It could hardly be called an interrogation though.

Almost every day Venka came to me with fresh discoveries he had made about Baukin.

The man seemed to know Kostya Vorontsov very well, though he had never belonged to his gang. In tsarist days Baukin had worked at a tar works belonging to Vorontsov's father.

Questioning Baukin about his wife and children, Venka expressed pity for a family whose father had turned bandit.

That was the nature of Venka's interrogation throughout. On one occasion, Baukin had in turn asked Malyshev how his shoulder was getting on.

"Very badly," Venka told him. "You've made a mess of my shoulder, Lazar."

"It could have been worse," Lazar said. "You can thank God it was your shoulder I hit. I could just as well have put you away for good. Do you know what a shot I am?"

"Boasting again," I said to Venka when I heard the story.

"Yes, a little," Venka smiled. "But that's all he can do for himself. 'Don't believe the doctors,' he said to me yesterday. 'There's only one really good thing to heal a wound if it hasn't festered too badly. A leaf of red bilberry. Not a dry leaf, but one that is still alive, the kind that you find in the snow out in the taiga.' He grew rather sad and went on: 'I don't think I'll ever see the taiga again. Not a chance.'"

"He's right there. He'll never see it again," I agreed. "If the court learns that he crippled your shoulder while you were performing your duty, they'll give him the death penalty."

"You're right, they may." Venka seemed troubled. "But I've never mentioned it in any of the reports. Only you and Kolya Solovyov know about it, and Kolya's not the sort that talks."

"Am I the sort that talks?"

"No, you're not either," Venka said graciously. "Lazar has a lot more to say. If I can only bring him round to it!"

Questioning his prisoner, Venka seemed to be piecing together the story of his life. He made the most not only of Baukin's grudging admissions but also of the evidence given by other prisoners, compared their statements, checked them with the material obtained through intelligence and often confronted the criminals with one another.

Finally, we learned that Baukin was a veteran of the tsar's army. He had displayed exceptional courage at the fronts of the First World War and had been recommended for four St. George Crosses. He had received three of them, but the fourth had been buried amid the papers of the War Office. He was still lodging complaints about that fourth medal while recovering from a severe wound in hospital when the October Revolution came and all his decorations were robbed of meaning. It had seemed to him then that his soldier's existence, too, had been robbed of all meaning. What was the good of having been wounded three times? He could take no more pride in the three medals he had been given. They were quite meaningless now.

Returning from hospital to his native Shumilovo in the heart of the taiga during the war, he found that his farm had gone to rack and ruin. Not a cow, not a horse was left. His wife and three little children were eking out a bare existence. His wife was working for one of the richer peasants.

The peasants, both rich and poor, were cursing the senseless war against the Germans. Baukin's medals meant nothing to them. There was nothing extraordinary about heroism.

In his native district, Lazar turned out to be almost the only man who was not war-weary. On the contrary, he was stimulated by the war despite his wounds. His thoughts were still with the war. He had grown out of his old habits and found it difficult to get back to the routine of farming.

Fortunately, or rather unfortunately, for him, his elder brother Mitrofan, who had risen to non-commissioned officer during the war, came home on leave late in the autumn of 1918.

The brothers had a heart-to-heart talk in their cups on the joyful occasion and for the first time in that troubled and confusing period Lazar found a man of his own views.

Flushed with drink, Mitrofan had boasted of his successes and assured his brother that he knew some brave men who were rallying in an army as good as the old one, and even stronger. If one joined it now, one could easily go far. Lazar's three medals, moreover, would carry a good deal of weight in this army and he would surely receive the fourth since all his documents were in perfect order.

Lazar had then left the hamlet in early winter and joined the White army as a volunteer.

It was not so much the fourth medal that drew him, however, as the temptation of the privileges and rewards promised to volunteers. This, he hoped, would help him to restore his farm after victory in the Civil War.

In the natural course of events, victory went to the Reds instead of to the Whites and Lazar had to go into hiding after the debacle. Severe punishment awaited him, since he had not been an ordinary soldier, but an assistant platoon commander and a volunteer to boot.

In his wanderings, he came upon Klochkov, a former staff captain of Kolchak's army, a man who had once served under the self-styled emperor of all of the taiga, but had then separated with a small band.

Though Lazar had joined this band, he had been at loggerheads with Klochkov for a long time. In his opinion they should have raided only the co-operatives and the central warehouses, but never disturb the peasants. Yevlampi Klochkov, on the other hand, was opposed to this. He had sprung from the urban merchant class and seemed determined to avenge himself on the entire population for his bad luck.

Lazar had hoped to remove Klochkov and assume the leadership of the band himself. The latter, however, had been too wary to trust Baukin overmuch and was never off his guard.

Venka Malyshev learned all this from cross examinations and was quick to notice that Lazar Baukin was different from the other men they had picked up. Even in their cells the bandits spoke of Lazar as the man who could have been their leader if events had taken a better turn.

Venka was most interested in Baukin's contacts with other bands. Klochkov and his gang could not have acted alone. It was clear that he had certain contacts with Vorontsov and others.

Venka Malyshev, moreover, was interested in something else: Baukin's real state of mind.

"I wonder," he would say, "just what Lazar would do if he managed to get free?"

"He would join one of the gangs."

"No, I don't think he would. He has a good head on his shoulders. I keep shaking him up with my questions."

"What for?" I asked.

"Because it's necessary."

Venka then had another idea: to visit Voyevodsky Forest in the winter, the place where Lazar Baukin had lived. He would have liked to see Lazar's wife and relatives and get as much information from them as he could.

We had acquired a Japanese aero-sledge, a trophy of the Civil War, but the thing unfortunately was out of order and had been lying about on a piece of waste ground all summer and autumn. It was only in the winter that a mechanic turned up and said that he could get it running again.

In our leisure time, Venka, Kolya Solovyov and I often went out to help the mechanic to loosen the rusty screws and nuts and dip them in kerosene, though we never expected to see that sledge in repair again. The mechanic seemed to find the mechanism quite beyond him.

"If I could only lay my hands on the diagram," he kept saying, "I'd take it apart in a jiffy then."

Kolya Solovyov and I were always poking fun at him, remarking that he must be a great expert indeed: "I'll bet he can pull any machine apart . . . and leave it at that."

But Venka used to call us stuck-ups and insist that the sledge would be fully repaired in time. Some two years before, he had been a fitter at the railway shops and now found a common language with the mechanic at once and was recognized by him as a man who had also had to do with the honourable trade of metal working.

"Just wait and see," Venka would say. "This sledge will carry us to Voyevodsky Forest."

Our chief liked the idea too and came out of his office more and more often to see how we were getting on.

The mechanic had received a complete set of leather togs taken from the captured stores: a coat, trousers, top-boots and helmet. He had also wanted to have a pair of leather gloves with long, funnel-like tops, the kind worn by the airmen, but the chief said he could have them only after the sledge was fully repaired.

The sledge which still lay on the snow upside down was a rallying point for many of our staff who kept giving endless advice, joking and arguing.

Yakov Uzelkov, too, came along on one occasion. He produced a pad of his newspaper's stationery from his brief-case and asked if there had been something new while he was away.

"I'm sorry I couldn't come earlier," he apologized, nibbling his pencil nervously. "I've been touring the uyezd for some days."

We hadn't seen Uzelkov since the time we had read his exaggerated account of the rout of Klochkov's gang at Zolotaya Pad and had almost forgotten his existence. But our irritation returned the minute we saw him.

"You'd better keep away from here," Venka advised him. "We have no use for windbags 'with blazing eyes.'"

"Why should you come to the station anyway?" I asked. "You like to use your imagination, so why bother us?"

Kolya Solovyov laughed too.

"You're a queer lot," said Uzelkov undaunted. "I've written you up as heroes and you're annoyed. Savages! Pithecanthropes! That's what you are!"

"Go away!" insisted Venka. "And stay away! We'll show you no more reports."

It was just then that our chief came across the empty lot and Uzelkov promptly attached himself to him. To our surprise, the chief spoke to him cordially, even put his arm around his shoulder and led him to his office. The last words we heard Uzelkov say were: "Popularization is what I'm after."

"Popularization" must have quite overwhelmed our chief who was fond of unusual words.

Venka and I were summoned to his office soon afterwards and raked over the coals.

"How do you explain this?" he asked, leaning back in his chair and gesturing to Uzelkov. "This own correspondent is writing about us, devoting his columns to our work, and all we do is to put a spoke in his wheels. Is that the right thing to do? Of course not! And I forbid it categorically."

Uzelkov departed with all the information he needed. The chief ushered him through the door and then resumed his chair.

"Why do you boys allow stupidity, petty revenge and such things to creep into your work I'd like to know?"

Venka explained that our attitude had nothing to do with petty revenge or settling scores, but was prompted only by the stupid lies of the correspondent.

"Lies?" The chief shook his grey bristles in surprise. "We won't stand for lying. See what he writes and report to me if there's something wrong. He should meet with no obstacles otherwise. Don't forget that he's a member of the press. One must never quarrel with the press."

Perhaps the chief was softened by far-away memories. He suddenly offered us his cigarette-case, something that he had never done before, and went on with a wistful smile: "You were born too late, boys. You haven't seen anything really good yet. You don't seem to know anything—not even what the press means. Take our old circus days, for instance. We not only looked

forward to the write-ups then, but, believe it or not, saw to them ourselves. Whenever a newsman came to the circus, we always shoved a rouble and even as much as three roubles into his hand—and in the most covert way too—and then waited for his write-up. Publicity! But what can you know about that? Now this fellow writes about you and you only get angry! And he writes about you free of charge, and in a complimentary tone! Such a correspondent should be welcomed—yes, welcomed!”

As might have been expected after this, Yakov Uzelkov found more support in our office than he had dreamed of. He used to drop in to see the chief informally and called him Yefrem Yefremovich.

Twice, we tried to expose the correspondent in the eyes of our chief, but failed to convince him. We complained that Yakuz was inventing too much, but this accusation was destroyed by the chief’s weighty argument.

“Take French wrestling, for instance. Many of the fans take exception to the fact that the wrestlers don’t do their job quite honestly and agree on the outcome beforehand: ‘Today I lose and tomorrow it’s your turn.’ They even call it a swindle, but I think they’re wrong. Do you think it would be better if they didn’t agree on the outcome beforehand? Much worse. The wrestlers may grow angry and even bite each other, tear each other’s pants and even draw blood. Now what’s good about that? Nothing! You’re just a lot of youngsters and don’t understand what art really is.” And the chief shut his eyes to show that the matter was closed.

Yakuz, therefore, went on writing what he liked. After his first victory over us, he seemed to inflate before our very eyes. Even his shoulders seemed broader. In addition, he took to wearing a Tolstoyan shirt of coarse wool, quite the rage then, and bought a pair of fashionable shoes. We used to joke about it and say that he had made his clothes out of other people’s misfortunes. But his voice grew more firm and authoritative.

“Another case of *libido sexualis*!” he would say when reading the latest report about a case of rape.

“What’s that?” the man on duty would ask.

“I’m just thinking aloud,” Uzelkov would answer curtly.

Talking to us on another occasion, he remarked irrelevantly: “Excuse me, but I have a conception of my own. I don’t think we are living in an age of hypochondria.”

This was too much for Venka. “That’s sheer rot,” he said. “What’s hypochondria anyway?”

“You ought to study more,” Uzelkov retorted. “You ought to study and not indulge in persiflage.”

He did not explain what he meant by persiflage either.

Finally, we came to believe that he just couldn’t help using those fancy words, no more than we could help using ours. We got used to them in time and no longer suspected hidden jibes. Gradually, too, we lost all interest in him. We were too busy with other matters and chiefly with the case of Klochkov’s gang.



The prosecutor had repeatedly ordered them transferred to the city jail. It was time to prepare for the trial, he argued. But Venka availed himself of his special powers as assistant chief of the operative section and kept the prisoners where they were, pleading operative exigencies.

He was still questioning Lazar Baukin and his accomplices.

#### 4

In our chief's office there was a clumsy glass bookcase stuffed with thick leather-bound volumes with gold inscriptions.

Whether or not he ever looked into them I don't know, but whenever anything especially involved turned up, he would toss his head at them and very severely explain:

"What does criminology say? Criminology says that the psychology of a criminal should be studied first and foremost. And what does that imply? It implies that one should go to the roots of the matter. The prisoner sometimes refuses to co-operate when under interrogation. He won't speak up and keeps wriggling and squirming. What's to be done then? You've got to influence his psychology."

The chief assumed that Venka Malyshev was handling Baukin in the proper manner.

"Malyshev's playing on the man's psychology," he would say, poking now at one of the documents before him, now at another. "And that's why I'm not interfering, though Baukin is obviously a complicated specimen and I would apply the severest measures."

That was just what Venka feared. He was sure that the chief would not forget the incident in the charge room, when Baukin refused to get up at his command and, in fact, had called him a fat swine.

Venka kept cautiously hinting that if Baukin were treated properly he would in time come out with some valuable evidence and that he was giving such evidence already.

Upon Venka's insistence, Baukin was soon transferred from solitary to a common cell.

"He'll feel better there," said Venka.

I was annoyed with the fuss he was making over Baukin. Who cared about making him feel better, the brute?

We were nearing the end of the interrogation when four of the bandits, including Lazar Baukin, asked for permission to have a bath.

"This may be our last bath," Baukin sighed, "and we're Christians, such as we are."

It had long been noticed that the more ferocious a bandit was, the more pitiful he became when he felt the hopelessness of his position.

And it was this, precisely, which made me think that Venka's coddling was of no use. It was just that Lazar had been able to move his pity. Venka was obviously heading for trouble.

"Why didn't you remember that you are a Christian before?" I asked Baukin. "You weren't thinking of your faith when you were killing and maiming people."

Lazar made no answer to this and Venka, who came to the cell door at that moment, called to Petya Bodyagin, nicknamed Frisky for his extraordinary and often uncalled-for agility. "Petya, take the prisoners to the bath-house," he said to him and passed down the corridor pretending not to notice me.

This happened late in the evening on Saturday. The bath-house had been well heated, since our boys were accustomed to take their baths on Saturday afternoons and our chief too would come in for a "steaming" before going to bed.

When the chief was done with his bath, the four bandits arrived at the bath-house, escorted by Frisky and a militiaman of the city office.

The prisoners complained that the bath-house was cold and asked if more wood could be put in the fire.

"Who's going to do it?" objected Frisky. "The bath-house attendant has gone home."

"We'll do it ourselves if you permit," said Lazar Baukin. "We're woodmen, you know. We live under the leaves and pray to the trees, but still we're people. With immortal souls!"

And the four of them began to haul wood in the dark, or rather only Nikifor Zotov did the hauling, while the other three slipped behind a pile of birch logs, bounced over the stone wall and were gone.

The pursuit was begun immediately and continued all night, but without results.

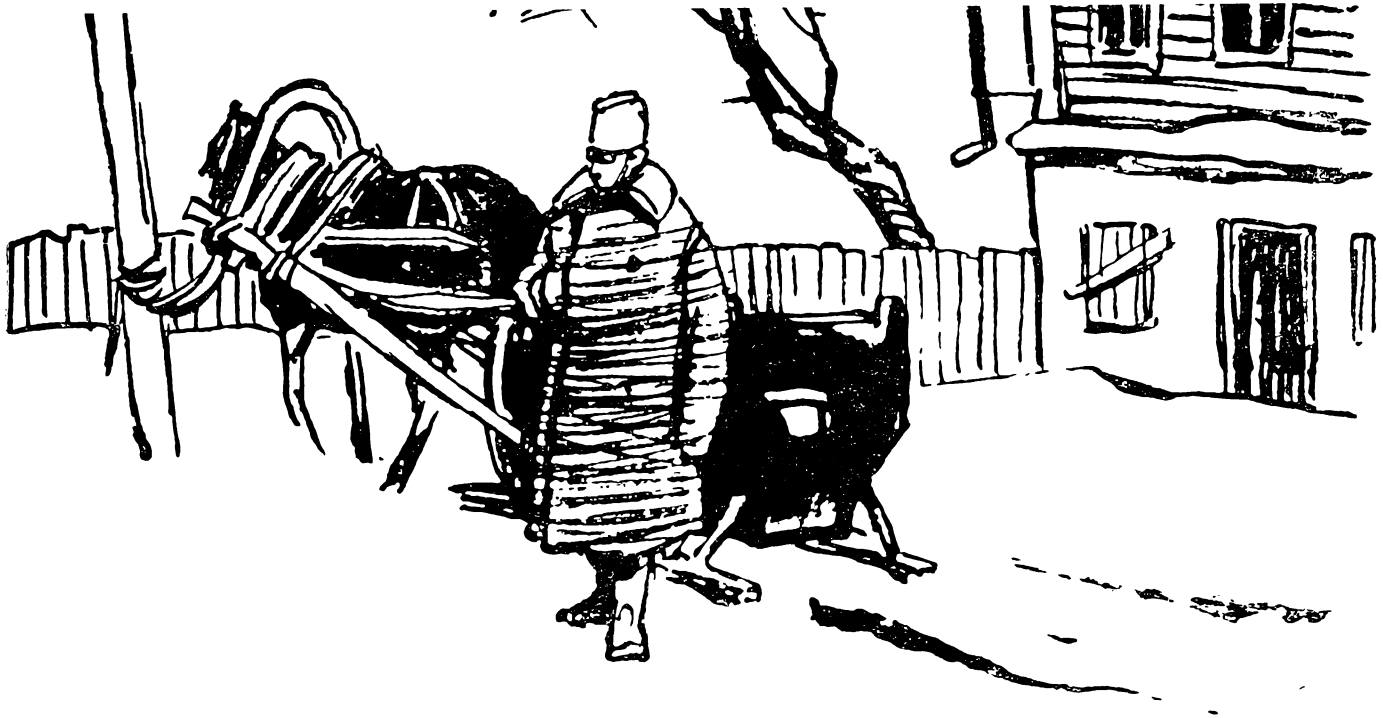
The entire town was buzzing over the news the next morning.

The elegant sleigh which drew up at the entrance of our station discharged the person of the uyezd prosecutor who visited us only on the most solemn occasions. At all other times, he was content to summon us to his presence. After wiping his thick glasses with a handkerchief and listening to our chief's explanation, he declared that he would demand that Bodyagin (Frisky) and the militiaman Kornoukhov who had stood guard at the bath-house should be put on trial at once.

Venka Malyshev then said that if it came to that it ought to be he, Malyshev, who should be tried, since the prisoners had been taken to the bath-house on his orders.

"The law holds for everyone," said the prosecutor, his pince-nez trembling on his nose. "If the criminals are not apprehended, you will be charged with culpable negligence, or perhaps," he went on, raising a finger significantly, "for other illegal actions. I won't go further than that now."

The prosecutor then paced out the distance from the bath-house to the wall, examined the barbed-wire which was nearly intact, summed up his findings with the words "expert work," and went on his way.



The chief escorted him to the sleigh, waving his hands and arguing hotly, but what about we could not hear.

Venka, hatless and wearing only his tunic, stayed by the wall alone, staring at a coil of rusty barbed-wire half-buried in the snow. This was the surplus that had been left after wiring the top of the wall. We should have run the wire still higher and I said as much to Venka, but he just waved the idea aside, grimacing.

"That's not the point. It's not the wire that matters."

"Well, what is the point? Psychology, I suppose? Do dogs have a psychology, too?"

Venka looked at me steadily but made no answer, only pouting and I could suddenly see him as he was when a little boy. He must have been a fair, freckled, thick-lipped boy with shy eyes. He was a strong and fully grown man now; the freckles were hardly noticeable and his hair was a shade darker, but his eyes were the eyes of a boy in this moment of adversity.

"This, Malyshev, is the fruit of your liberalism," said the chief shaking his finger as he returned from the gates. "Where are you going to look for that fine Lazar Baukin and his company now? And to think that I warned you too. Did I or didn't I warn you?"

Venka said nothing.

The chief drew his cigarette case from his trouser pocket, thumbed the snake which formed the clasp and took a cigarette.

"You're a stubborn sort of a man, Malyshev," he said, rolling the cigarette nervously between his maimed fingers and lighting a match. "And what does it all imply? It implies that I ought really to remove you from your post."

Venka looked at the chief through narrowed eyes.

"Please do! See if I care. That's up to you. You can appoint and discharge whomever you like."

"That's no way to talk. You forget whom you're speaking to," said the chief frowning as he enveloped Venka in a cloud of smoke from his cigarette. "I really ought to dismiss you." He strode angrily away towards the porch, but paused at the steps and looked back. "But I won't dismiss you. I'll make you find Baukin. You heard what the prosecutor said, didn't you? The criminals must be found. Whatever the means! Do you think you can do it?"

"I don't know," said Venka. "I haven't been to the fortune-teller's yet. How can I know such a thing?"

"Now, that's no way to talk," repeated the chief and mounted the steps, leaving Venka in the yard.

Polyakov, the medical assistant, came out of the dispensary just then.

"Do you want to chill that shoulder in addition to everything?" he asked Venka. "I've been watching you through the window. Let's go and change the bandage. I'll have to be leaving soon. They've called me to the uyezd health department."

Venka followed him obediently.

I dropped in at the secret operative office when Venka was back from the dispensary. He was sitting at his desk reading a document with his chin on his hands. I looked over his shoulder and saw that it was one of Baukin's statements.

Why should he bother with that now? I thought, but said nothing. He must have been feeling very bad about it all. I asked him if he would come to dinner.

"No," he answered, looking through the window. "It's too early. And then, I'm not hungry."

The window faced the snow-covered lot where the mechanic was still tinkering with the aero-sledge. I was surprised to notice that the body had already been set on its runners and the propeller in its place.

"I think I'll go out and help him a bit," Venka said, nodding towards the window. "My head isn't working very well just now. I can't seem to understand anything."

He put on his Mongol hat, got into his padded jacket, took his mittens and went out.

When I returned from the dining-room he was still sitting on his heels by the sledge, threading a nut clamped in a vice. His face and hands were stained with oil, and he was laughing and talking to the mechanic.

That's the sort of job he's really fit for, I thought as I approached them. As though reading my mind, Venka himself said smiling: "If the old man gives me the sack, I'm going to be a mechanic—the assistant chief of the mechanical department." I squatted down next to him, still wondering. It was strange that he had forgotten his troubles so quickly and was even cheerful.

"The sledge will soon be ship-shape," he said. "You didn't think it ever would, did you?" he gently loosened the vice. "One should believe in things! Isn't that right?" he asked the mechanic boyishly and laughed without waiting for an answer. "I, for one, can believe in miracles, in all sorts of miracles."

Perhaps it was the nervous shock that made him so hilarious? Or was it just bravado? He didn't want to show how badly Baukin's escape had affected him.

And yet, he went without dinner and could not fall asleep for a long time that night. Perhaps because his shoulder ached.

But on the next day, he seemed to have forgotten all about Lazar Baukin. "What good will that do?" he retorted, when the military school trainees were put on skis and ordered to comb the woods near Dudari. "Do you think Lazar is a bigger fool than we? If he's gone, he's gone! He knew where to go, I'm sure. He's not the sort of a fellow who can't figure things out."

I was struck by the fact that he seemed not at all angry with Baukin. To hear him talk, one might suppose that he himself had helped Lazar to get away. Such a thought never crossed my mind, of course. Venka never thought the man would skip from the bath-house. I couldn't help remembering too, how pale Venka had been when he heard what had happened. Besides, he had joined the trainees in the search. "I never expected such a thing to happen," I heard him say when they had finished combing the forests before morning. "I would have shot him myself for such a thing. It's devilishly bad luck, them getting away like that, after we captured them in an open fight."

It would be wrong to say that we were idle in the weeks that followed. We raked the town and several neighbouring villages to find the men, but it was no use.

"We ought to go to Voyevodsky Forest," suggested Venka.

The chief was inclined to agree, but thought we ought to wait until the aero-sledge was ready.

Venka was spending most of his leisure time by the sledge out on the empty lot. In our talks, now, he never mentioned Baukin. Nor was the sledge meant for Baukin's capture alone. The chief held that it was high time to have a look at Voyevodsky Forest and put out a few feelers to see what the population were up to and determine their attitude to Kostya Vorontsov's band who were biding their time in the wilder parts of the snow-bound taiga.

But the prosecutor kept harping on Baukin and phoning our chief for hopeful tidings.

"I haven't any yet, but there will be," the chief reassured him. "We're preparing for a serious expedition."

Aside of this, life in the office took its normal course.

Still it would be wrong to think that we were busy with our duties alone. There were other events as well.

## 5

There was a new cashier at the grocery near the office, a lovely girl.

Venka saw her first and pointed her out to me. She was perched behind the glistening register on a high stool in her glass cubby-hole. Earnest to the point of arrogance, she sat there in her fuzzy blue jacket, punching the receipts with the condescending air of one who had graciously agreed to substitute

for the regular cashier instead of attending to other, much more interesting and important affairs of her own.

In those days, it was almost impossible to choose the sort of work one liked to do. People were weary of unemployment and took whatever job they could find. Anything to support their families and themselves! We were sure that the girl was a cashier by mere accident. There was nothing of the cashier about her, nothing at all.

It was obvious that the job displeased her as did the customers, and that she was just trying to be resigned about it. This expression of arrogant resignation at first surprised us and then led to unforeseen expenditures.

The drawers of our desks were soon crammed with match boxes.

Neither Venka nor I cared to admit to each other that we had been smitten, but it must have been evident to anyone else. We dropped in at the shop together and separately every day and often several times a day. There was nothing that we really needed to buy and so the boxes of matches came to be a real barometer of our affliction.

We bought them by the carton at first, but as time went on, we could afford only one or two boxes at a purchase, and still we could not find the courage to talk to her. Strangely enough, the more often we came, the more timid we grew. We got to be too timid even to drop in. It seemed to us that she had noticed that we were not altogether disinterested customers and that people were beginning to laugh at us.

But in spite of the growing rush of work, we kept hoping to catch a glimpse of her at least by chance. Perhaps we would meet her in the street, we thought, that is, each of us thought for himself. At any rate, I'm sure Venka was thinking exactly as I.

One morning, he drew his top-boots from under his bed, polished them until they shone, and wore them henceforth instead of his clumsy felt boots, though it was still bitterly cold.

Even I could see that he was far handsomer in those snug-fitting boots and it was obvious that he wore them for the cashier alone.

Still, I could not help asking him: "Leather boots in the winter?"

"I find them more comfortable to walk in," he explained, but suddenly grew furiously embarrassed and I said no more.

I continued to wear my felt boots, and to compensate for these, kept inventing suitable phrases in case I did happen to meet her. I was sure that I would meet her somewhere sooner or later.

Our agitation grew.

I don't know whether or not Uzelkov noticed all this, but sitting in the charge room one day, he pointed excitedly to the window:

"Just look! A real Amazon, isn't she?"

We hurried to the window and saw her walking down the pavement, tall and slender, in embroidered fur boots, carrying a tiny dressing case like that of an actress.





I fought my excitement for a moment and then casually asked Yakuz: "Well, what do you think of her?"

Uzelkov peered chewing his lips like an old roué who had known beautiful women aplenty in his hey day and was long weary of them.

"Not altogether unattractive," he decided.

The blood rushed to Venka's face. He frowned, turned away from the window and hurriedly left the room as though he had something urgent to do.

"I'm going to get to know her today," said Uzelkov to no one in particular as he looked through the window. "She must be an ecstatic girl, just the kind I like. I feel the ecstasy even in her walk." With both hands he put his mangy hareskin hat on his head.

He was as good as his word.

The shop was empty just before closing time in the evening when Uzelkov dropped in to buy a package of cigarettes and had the cashier register the last sale. Having received the package, he lit a cigarette and engaged the girl in conversation as she counted her receipts for the day.

I'm more than sure that he unfastened his piebald coat to expose his Tolstoyan shirt, his knitted silk tie with a scarlet stripe half way down, and his array of metal and enamel badges.

Perhaps it was these or some extraordinary words of his that caught the imagination of the cashier. Be as it may, she allowed him to see her home when she had finished counting the receipts, without probably paying the slightest attention to his insignificant personality, as they call it.

Though it was very late Uzelkov rushed to the charge room afterwards, and told us all the details.

"She's alone, like Madame Bovary," he said, trumpeting into his motley handkerchief with deep satisfaction. "And she's a stranger in the town, like myself. The only difference is that she came here from Tomsk. She has no relatives here and lives at Number 6, Kuznechnaya Street. She is quite an educated person and can talk about things. Her father is a teacher of physics or chemistry. I don't exactly remember. Like myself, she worked at a factory until recently—in Usolye, I think. That's where she joined the Comsomol. Her name is Julia Maltseva. It's by accident that she's here. She was told that she would find a position at the club, but it turned out to be a mistake."

The thing that surprised us most was that she was a member of the Comsomol, because Comsomol girls in those days dressed very simply, just as they were shown on the posters: with kerchiefs on their bobbed hair and in workman's shoes. But this cashier had long, wavy hair done up in a dainty way and held in place with a handsome, glittering comb.

We were glad to learn that she belonged to the Comsomol, since this sort of brought us nearer. At the same time, we were chagrined: it had to be Uzelkov and not one of us who was the first to get all this information.

Some might wonder what sort of experts in detection we were if we couldn't find out such simple facts.

But I'm sure that no detective department would agree with this. It was no routine job after all. I realize now that this, our first real infatuation, quite naturally deprived us of all common sense and paralysed our activity.

Whenever Uzelkov came to the charge room now, he would be telling us all about Julia Maltseva, her character, habits and tastes.

"She's simply suffocating in this hole of a town and is glad, I think, that I see her home sometimes," he said one evening sitting in the charge room his eyes on the clock. "When I did not come around last week, she was even hurt. I sat talking to her last night until nearly twelve."

"Where could you have been sitting and talking to her?" I asked.

"At her home, of course, at Number 6, Kuznechnaya Street. She asked me to read Esenin to her."

"Hm . . . couldn't she read it by herself?"

"That's not the point. She wanted *me* to read it to her. She finds that I read poetry very well. She's quite an educated girl. I've asked her the most difficult questions. Even about physics and chemistry. And she reacts beautifully. On my initiative, too, we re-read *Madame Bovary* together."

We wouldn't have felt so badly about it if someone else had made friends with Julia Maltseva. But Uzelkov of all people!

In later years it often occurred to me that people, in most cases, like or dislike one another quite unjustifiably. Perhaps we too disliked Uzelkov for no valid reason and stubbornly ignored his merits which were perhaps appreciated by Julia Maltseva. He couldn't have been altogether devoid of good points.

At any rate, Uzelkov's good luck, exaggerated as it might have been, maddened us day after day. We were baffled. To what did he owe his success?

I well recall how upset we were when he told us that he had stayed with Julia until midnight. We did not quite believe him, but were hurt nonetheless.

Leaving the station that evening, Venka and I made straight for Dolgushin's through the frost-bound street. We usually went there on Saturdays, after bathing, and this was only Thursday, but still that's where we went.

There was music as usual. Two skinny girls stood on the small stage singing a dismal Gypsy song. We could see them through the glass door separating the restaurant hall from the cloak-room.

The huge bear with his white glass eyes shining in the yellow light of the oil reflector lamp stood in his usual place before the cloak-room. That was why the restaurant was often called "At the Bear's."

Before the Revolution, the establishment had been frequented mostly by the rich merchants, the fur traders and gold prospectors and had been run on a lavish scale with an eye to its wealthy clients.

Makhotkin, the former owner, was said to have gone abroad after the rout of Kolchak. Many of his customers had done the same, though some had stayed behind, adjusting themselves to business conditions under the new regime.

One of these was Dolgushin, formerly Makhotkin's shop assistant.

He had re-opened the establishment last year under the same signboard and on the same footing. The clientele, however, was not nearly as exclusive, though some of the guests were singled out for special honours and attentions by the host.

We, for example, were always met at the very threshold by Dolgushin. Engaged in various shady deals, he was a little apprehensive of us and therefore over-attentive—like a man trying to redress an old wrong. Elbowing the doorman aside, he helped us out of our short coats with his usual animated patter: "Come in, come in, gentlemen! . . ."

"The gentlemen are at the bottom of Lake Baikal," Venka reminded him.

"Well, you can forgive an old man. It's just a habit, my dear comrades."

"The wolves of Zhigalovo are your comrades," said I.

Dolgushin tripped on ahead of us laughing hilariously as though we had said something very funny and shouting as he went: "Clear that table, Zashar. The chiefs are here. Change that table-cloth."

We were conducted to a table in our favourite corner from which we commanded a good view of the public without attracting attention.

Dolgushin was clucking over us wreathed in smiles and interfering with the waiter who was laying the table. We pretended not to notice him, as if it were not he who was the host of this pleasant, well-heated and sparkling establishment decorated with fresh boughs of silver-fir, pretty lace curtains and bronze chandeliers with crystal pendants.

We despised Dolgushin.

Even now, I cannot understand how he was able to suffer our insolence so calmly.

But come to think of it, our insolence was really intended to conceal our embarrassment. We were members of the Comsomol and should not have come to a private restaurant. And yet, here we were.

We liked the clean cloths and the steaks and, to tell the truth, we liked the Gypsy songs too. Through that haze of tobacco smoke the voices seemed far, far away.

"Some vodka, if you please?" Dolgushin would ask.

"No," Venka would answer.

"But please! It's not home-brew we have here, but real vodka. I have a special permit for it."

"We don't want it."

"Don't you drink at all?"

"No."

"Ah, it's a difficult job yours," Dolgushin would sigh. "It's a wonder you can do it without ever taking a drink. It's not for us to judge, of course. How about a tankard of beer?"

"How about it?" Venka would say. To show his special esteem Dolgushin would himself bring two beers and two steaks garnished with potatoes and pickles cut in the shape of hearts. The meal was finished with two glasses of strong tea.

It was always the same, the way we wanted it to be.

"Young people are so wonderfully duty-conscious nowadays!" Dolgushin would exclaim every time. "They'll have neither vodka nor wine. And they're right too. What good is there in vodka anyway? It's just poison. How I wish it didn't exist at all!"

To this we would say nothing. We did not dare to drink vodka at Dolgushin's and did not care for it very much either. It was the atmosphere of the place that we enjoyed. We relaxed there and found it an ideal place for thinking things out.

The town had not yet recovered from the aftermath of the Civil War. Funds were lacking. Half demolished and burned by Kolchak's troops during their retreat, it was dotted with ruins and dug-outs.

The Paris Commune Club was the only one of its kind in town. It was located in a former convent and arranged only meetings or interminably featured ancient films starring Vera Kholodnaya, Mozzhukhin and Lysenko.

We spent a long time in the restaurant that evening. Not a word was said of Uzelkov or the cashier, as though they were farthest from our minds.

We were about to pay the bill, when we noticed Uzelkov through the glass door. Carelessly, he tossed his mangy coat and hareskin hat to the old doorman, smoothed his Tolstoyan shirt, brushed back his hair with shrivelled hands and entered the spacious hall, scanning the visitors with myopic eyes tearful from the frost.

"So you too are frequenters of the gilded estaminet!" he exclaimed, discerning us at last. Then, turning to Dolgushin, he added: "Hail to private capital!"

"Capital? We have no capital to speak of." Dolgushin sighed. "All capital has gone abroad nowadays."

"Now, now! Don't be so humble. I'm not the finance inspector, you know!" Uzelkov slipped into a seat at our table. "Please, bring me a coffee." He raised a warning finger: "Black coffee, and strong!"

"Very well," Dolgushin bowed. "What else may I bring?"

"What have you got?"

"Some pastry perhaps?"

"That will do, but don't bring those creamy ones."

"I quite understand."

There was a barely perceptible shade of mutual understanding between the proprietor and Uzelkov—as though the two alone were initiated in the subtleties of restaurant culture, on the wane in those harsh times; and though Uzelkov ordered nothing but a cup of coffee and a slice or two of pastry, Dolgushin's withered features radiated satisfaction over such an important and refined client.

Actually, there was nothing at all important about Uzelkov. It even occurred to me that he had little money and had ordered nothing substantial for that reason. The air with which he was sipping his coffee, however, seemed to indicate that he had had a hearty supper and had ordered coffee—just to dally with. Smoking between fleeting sips from the tiny cup, he would meticulously flick the ashes from his cigarette on the paws of the porcelain hare proffering the ash-tray.

An array of bottles of soft drinks flanked with plates of various sizes containing cheese, caviare and smoked *omul* glimmered darkly under the glass of the counter near our table.

"The only thing I like about Dudari is its food supply position," said Uzelkov, nodding at the display. "The situation is fair even if compared with Moscow."

And so we learned that Uzelkov had visited Moscow only a year ago. He mentioned it casually, but we were duly impressed.

"Did you see Red Square?" asked Venka eagerly, leaning forward, his arms on the table.

"Of course."

"Did you see Lenin too?"

"It goes without saying," said Uzelkov, drawing his cup and saucer closer.

"What goes without saying?" countered Venka with shining eyes. "Don't beat about the bush! Did you see him or did you not?"

"Is this a cross-examination!" Uzelkov said resentfully, moving back his chair.

"I'm sorry," answered Venka with some embarrassment. "It is just that I'm very interested. Just where did you see him?"

"That's a long story."

"Tell it to us. We have plenty of time." Venka beckoned the waiter and ordered more beer. "You ought to order something too, something substan-

tial," he suggested to Uzelkov. "You can't make a meal of pastry, you know. Perhaps you have no money on you? We'll pay."

"So you want to play the philanthropists, do you?"

"We don't want to play anything. We're just anxious to hear that story. Order what you like and we'll have a good talk."

"You are queer people, I must say." Uzelkov regarded us quizzically.

It seemed strange to him that Venka who had always dealt with him so gruffly should suddenly show warm interest, even to the point of treating him to supper.

Uzelkov refused to have supper at our expense and the talk of Moscow flagged. The reporter would not or could not—rather could not—tell us anything new about Lenin, though Venka plied him with questions, turning him upside down and inside out like a child examining a mechanical doll to see what made it go.

"And why didn't you stay in Moscow?" Venka asked finally.

Uzelkov had finished his coffee, leaving a tiny morsel of pastry for politeness sake.

"I belong where I'm needed most," he said. "Siberia will suffer a long time yet for lack of educated people."

"Quite true," Venka agreed, but then asked again: "And when do you expect to leave?"

"But why do you ask?" replied Uzelkov, toying with his spoon in the empty cup.

"I just wondered. Would you care for some beer?"

"I wouldn't mind."

"You were sort of commissioned here for a time, or so we gather?"

"Yes, for a time," conceded Uzelkov, raising his tankard, "but time is an elastic conception and so I've decided to stretch it."

"So you can stretch your stay at will wherever you like?"

"Yes, but within certain limits. When the time comes, I shall go. Julia Maltseva told me yesterday that she was simply horrified at the thought of staying here after I go."

Venka blushed furiously and summoned the waiter to pay the bill.

"Put his order on our bill," he said to the waiter, indicating Uzelkov.

"Never mind! Don't worry about me," Uzelkov protested. "I'll pay my own bill. It's strange to see a Comsomol member playing the philanthropist."

Actually, Venka had not meant to play any role at all. We had meant to do nothing more than be pleasant to Uzelkov, feeling that there was something melancholy behind those pompous phrases of his. All that bluster, perhaps, was meant to conceal certain failures in life, disappointments which peered out at us through his round bird eyes.

"You look rather sad to me," Venka had even said to him. "Have you been having trouble with your work?"

"A thinking man is always sad," answered Uzelkov. "That's over your head, naturally. It's only the simple functions that you exercise, so to speak."

You have no other interest as far as I can see. Spiritual life, in other words is inaccessible to you. You do not even read. . . ."

"You're right there," Venka agreed without taking offence.

Though he might have taken offence of course. Another person would surely have done so, because Uzelkov's tone, though melancholy, was almost scornful.

"We have no time, you see," Venka merely said. "No time to read or to be sad. We only manage to read the stuff that our work requires and that's very little, of course. Why don't you have some more beer?" he said, filling Uzelkov's tankard to the brim. "Beer won't make you drunk, only healthy. Just see how thin you are. The beer will make your cheeks rosy at once."

"Hm. That's a moot question!" Still, Uzelkov drained his beer.

"Now tell us how you write your stuff," asked Venka filling his tankard again. "You take some incident and then think up the story, don't you?"

"Think up the story!" scoffed Uzelkov with narrowing eyes. "You put it in such a primitive way. It's human interest that I'm creating for the material. We have to think of the readers, don't you understand? Do you think that the newspaper business is such a simple matter? There are many who won't subscribe at all. The cultural standards are very low. We've got to give them interesting stuff all the time, and with a bit of verve too!" And Uzelkov clicked his tongue as he had done the first time he had met him in the charge room.

"You mean you can't . . . help inventing things." Venka again leaned forward over the table. "Perhaps they make you do it? That's normally done?"

"Yes, that's normally done." Uzelkov laughed. "I write for my readers and I want them to know me. I've got to make a name. The readers know me as Yakuz. I'm not the sort who just picks up the facts. I interpret them and present them in a definite political light. In this sense, my role is extremely important, hard as you may find to understand."

"Why, no," objected Venka. "We do understand. Politics are necessary, of course. It is important to explain what life should be like and how things should be arranged, but I don't think it's at all necessary to lay it on too thick or kind of falsify."

"Unfortunately, it's not for us to decide what is necessary and what is not," Uzelkov said significantly and stared at his empty tankard.

"And why not? Are we worse than others?" Venka splashed the remainder of the beer into Uzelkov's tankard. "We belong to the Comsomol, you know, and are supposed to do a bit of thinking for ourselves."

Uzelkov produced his cigarette case and lit up.

"It's all very well to discuss things at a restaurant," he said, snapping the match between his delicate fingers, "but life is more complicated than you imagine. It is not enough for a really thinking man to eat steaks and wash them down with beer as you do. Even the ancients knew that man lives not by bread alone. I mean a genuinely thinking man. . . ."

And he spoke again of Julia Maltseva. She too, it seemed, belonged to the thinking category. He said that she sang beautifully, a pure soprano. And she danced very well too.

"But such talents are wasted in this town." Uzelkov sighed and told us in detail what had happened the other day.

She had paid out some extra money to a customer by mistake the other day and there was such a row that if not for the sympathy of some comrades she would have certainly been brought to trial.

It was Uzelkov probably who had shown this sympathy, and that was why he had gone without his supper and had been drinking coffee for *bon ton* and smoking cigarette after cigarette to appease his hunger.

When he was paying his bill, I noticed that he kept his wallet on his knees, out of sight, to prevent us from seeing how little it contained. It was evident that he was out of money. But to offer him a loan would have been awkward. He was too proud. Yes, proud and yet pitiful.

I wondered what Julia Maltseva could see in him if it were really true that he visited her every evening.

He told us, too, that she cooked her own dinner after work, and then in a happy mood, played her guitar. The song that she sang best, in his opinion, was: "Everybody says that I am fickle, that I'm too free with my love."

"Still, she is not devoid of the deeper spiritual interests. She is dreaming of entering the university and is studying physics and chemistry. But she likes fiction too. She has read the whole of Flaubert. Madame Bovary is her favourite heroine, and mine too, by the way." But there was no animation in Uzelkov's features as he discussed Julia Maltseva. He sat there as dull and sad as ever, while I listened with bated breath and Venka frowned more and more though he pretended not to be listening but looking at the people in the restaurant.

Uzelkov suddenly noticed an acquaintance in the room, interrupted his story and went off without even taking leave of us. Evidently he had needed us only until he could find another acquaintance, and his manner dispelled all the kindly feelings we had just felt for him.

We went out into the dark, deserted street crisp with frost.

"Quite a man, that Uzelkov," said Venka, turning up his collar, and for a moment I did not know whether he was serious or not. "Quite a man, I must say," he repeated.

"He has quite a nose," I laughed, "and musical ears too."

"That's nothing to laugh at." Venka regarded me gravely. "If you concentrate on a man's nose and ears, you are liable to miss the other things. Especially if you're envious besides. . . ."

"Do you mean to say that I'm envious of Uzelkov?"

"Why you alone? Perhaps we both are."

"But envious of what?"

"Of many things. Anyway, the fact is that we are envious, and that's why we're angry."



"But why should we envy him?" I was indignant. "He's only a windbag after all. I don't think he ever visited Moscow. And he didn't see Lenin either. If he had seen him, he would have a lot to tell us. Actually, he's been repeating only what the papers say. Perhaps he was sent to Dudari because he's no good anywhere else and the capable reporters were afraid to come here."

"But he was not afraid. So he's no coward, at any rate. But you are angry with him and talk of his nose."

"Why should I be angry with him?"

"For many reasons. Because he jumped up and left us like a pair of dummies, for one thing."

"You're right," I admitted. "I can't stand those airs of his and the way he talks of our spiritual life. I don't like airs."

"And I detest those who dig up irrelevant nonsense," Venka suddenly flared up. "I detest people who get angry like you and begin to dig up absurdities. We've been talking to him all evening trying to understand something, and have understood nothing. And now we're going to laugh at his nose and ears like a pair of old wives at the market. Nose or no nose, he goes his own way without asking our advice."

Venka did not say just what he meant by "his own way." Neither of us liked the stories that Uzelkov wrote; and that was all he was doing as far as we could see.

I asked Venka what he meant, but he dismissed the question with a wave of his hand.

We were both annoyed about something when we came home. But I at least knew just what it was that annoyed me. I had not liked the way Venka had taken Uzelkov under his wing. Why should he have done it? Whatever for?

We went to bed without a word, but could not fall asleep for a long time. I could hear Venka's bed creaking as he tossed from side to side and was sure that this was keeping me awake as well. Then there was silence until Venka suddenly said:

"Still, I wonder what his strong point really is?"

"His education, perhaps." I knew that he meant Uzelkov.

"His education?" Venka sounded surprised; his bed creaked for the last time. He must have rolled himself in his blanket. I also readjusted my pillow and tried to fall asleep, when Venka suddenly threw off his blanket.

"I can't get used to sleeping on my left side. I start dreaming all sorts of nonsense at once. But I can't sleep on my right either because my shoulder hurts. He did make a mess of my shoulder."

"Try lying on your back as I do, or on your stomach."

"It doesn't do any good," Venka complained. "And he's so clever at slipping things in: chemistry, physics and even that... what's her name?"

"Madame Bovary."

Our thoughts were running along the same channels and it was easy to guess what was on his mind.

"That's all rot," he said in a tired voice, "Madame Bovary indeed!" A minute later he was asleep with his head buried in the pillow.

I got up, drank a glass of water and then fell asleep too.

"I think Dolgushin adds something to his beer," he said through his teeth as he stood brushing them diligently in the morning. "I have a headache."

"I think so too."

"What?"

"Well, that Dolgushin adds something to his beer. . . ."

"It should be looked into," said Venka grimly. "Let the inspector look into it, and if it's so, we'll clamp down on him at once."

When we had our tea, Venka's headache vanished. He brushed his boots, putting now one foot, now the other on the stool, and then gave them a high gloss with a velvet cloth.

That was something he did every day, as well as brush his clothes and iron, and inspect them before the window.

"He's as trim as a bird," our hostess Lukeria Sidorovna used to say about him. She was a sickly, tearful woman and did not like us overmuch, since we had been put in her house against her will by order of the Communal Management.

Polishing his boots that morning, Venka said that we were working very badly, were busy with nonsense and getting nowhere. We really ought to go to Voyevodsky Forest even by cart if there was nothing else. We couldn't wait for the aero-sledge all winter. The spring might come before it was ready.

## 6

The cold abated by morning and there was a fresh snow-fall. The street was softly carpeted and cheerful.

We were walking down the street when I happened to look at a two-storey wooden house with carved cornices.

"Let's drop in at the library," I joked.

"Why don't you?" Venka asked.

I laughed.

"I'm quite serious. I haven't the time or I'd go there myself," he insisted.

Still laughing, I climbed the steps of the neat little house and gingerly opened the door.

Katya Petukhova was flustered when she saw me, probably thinking that I was on someone's trail. I, too, grew a little confused at her embarrassment.

"What can I do for you?" she asked with cold formality.

Slender, so blonde that her hair seemed white, she stood facing me in her grey smock, as though about to be offended.

"The thing is," I stammered, "that Veniamin Malyshev, you probably know him, asked me to drop in. He wants me to get some books."

"What books?" came the question as coldly as before.

She could not have expected me to come here, and especially so early in the morning. I had never put in an appearance at the library at all. She must have anticipated something unpleasant from my visit, fearing that I would suddenly demand: "Isn't there someone hiding here?" Instead, I merely extracted the notebook in which I had kept a record of all the fanciful expressions Uzelkov was accustomed to use.

"François Rabelais, Madame Bovary," I read off the names.

"We've got Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*," Katya said in a matter-of-fact tone, completely reassured, "but in an abridged edition. And François Rabelais is out. Why do you need these books so early in the morning?"

"We've just got to have them, Katya," I said in a "secretive" voice. "And also some textbook on chemistry."

"Chemistry," echoed Katya and set her stepladder to the tall bookshelves. "What chemistry are you interested in?"

"What do you mean 'what chemistry?'"

"Organic or inorganic?"

"Both if you don't mind," I said resignedly.

Katya laid several textbooks on chemistry on the long narrow table covered with linoleum.

"Choose the one you want. And here is Flaubert."

I picked up the three fattest books.

"You can't have three at once," she said, taking one of them back. "And wait a moment! I must file a card for you. You may keep them two weeks," said Katya writing. "Please, bring them back when you've read them. But what made you pick such books: chemistry and Flaubert? If you've decided to go in for self-education, you should do so gradually. I could draw up a list of books, if you like."

"Please do, we happen to need such a list very urgently."

"I'll do it very urgently," Katya smiled.

Still, I went away quite satisfied.

We finished the abridged version of *Madame Bovary* in two evenings, and then I brought some of the books recommended by Katya Petukhova. I can't say that we found reading very exciting. We just didn't like *Madame Bovary*. As to the chemistry, it turned out to be so unintelligible that we decided to lay it aside for another occasion.

We should have been grateful to Katya Petukhova. It was she who taught us to make notes.

There were plenty of books in that library. They had come to Dudari with the political exiles of old. In short, there was as much to read as one could desire. What we lacked was time. We could not plan it to suit our own needs. And yet, we did manage to read a fair number of books in a relatively short period.

But the more we read, the more we realized how badly we needed an education.

We had never noticed it before; that is, we had noticed it, but not as acutely as now when we were beginning to read in earnest.

It would be wrong to say that we had begun to read on account of Uzelkov only in the hope of attracting the attention of Julia Maltseva and rising in her estimation.

We would have taken to reading just the same, but Uzelkov was undoubtedly the first to jeer at our ignorance. Afterwards, it seemed queer to us that we could have done without books, while everyone about was either reading or studying.

At the Comsomol meetings, strangely enough, Venka and I were troubled after every lecture on Socialism or life under Socialism. We feared that we would turn out to be the most backward under Socialism. What would we do then? We had not even finished school and yet everyone was supposed to be cultured under Socialism.

One evening, when Venka was reading Lenin's pamphlet on *The Tasks of the Youth Leagues*, our friend Vaska Tsaritsin came in. He was a very good chap, employed as electrician at the restoration job of the local power station. He was on his way to a rehearsal—at the drama circle—and had just stopped to exchange a few words. He told us a funny story and was surprised that we did not laugh at once. Why were we so glum, he asked?

"Are we really? But what should we be cheerful about?"

"I don't know, but you're too glum," he said, looking at the pamphlet we were reading. "And what exam are you reading up for?"

"We're not reading up for anything. We're just reading," explained Venka. "Have you read the pamphlet yourself?"

"No," laughed Vaska. "I'm not out to become a leading comrade. I'm all right as I am."

"Leading comrades have nothing to do with it," said Venka indignantly. "Every Comsomol ought to read it. I read it last year, but somehow could not quite understand it all. Now listen. . . ."

And he read the passages he had underlined. "You can become a Communist only by enriching your mind with the knowledge of all the treasures created by mankind.' Or here: 'A Communist would become a mere braggart if all the knowledge he has obtained were not digested in his mind.'"

"So what?" asked Vaska. "I know all about that long ago. There was a lecture about it at the power station."

"What I'd like to know is: Do you think you're fit to become a Communist?"

"I am," said Tsaritsin firmly. "I have two Party recommendations, and the Comsomol organization recommends me too."

"That goes without saying," said Venka. "I've got the necessary Party recommendations too, but what I mean is: can such as we become Communists now?"

"Why not?" laughed Vaska. "Do you think they'll make us take an exam to find out whether we have digested all the knowledge or not. Some of the Communists I've met know even less than we. There's old Mikhei Yegorych at the power station and he's an old Communist, too. He took part in the 1905 Revolution, but can work only as a fitter and is not even trying to become an engineer. But still, he's a Communist."

"There's no arguing with you, I see," Venka said. "You don't seem to understand what I mean. You're afraid of an exam and glad there won't be any. But what about your conscience?"

"Conscience?"

"Is a Communist conscience necessary or not?"

"I have a conscience," said Tsaritsin with dignity while eyeing his reflection in the dark window-pane. "But you're always thinking of the ideal, Venka! If things were the way you put them, then we'd only get to be Communists in our doddering old age. Here's an example: I've been given the role of General Galliffet in our drama-circle. Now, Yuri Tikhonovich, our instructor in dramatics, says that I do not look like him in the least and that the role does not fit me at all, but there's no one to take my place. I'll have to play the part and the audience will never guess whether I really look like him or not. No one in Dudari has ever seen General Galliffet. All that they have ever seen is Galliffet riding breeches. No one has actually seen the general in the flesh."

"I see," Venka nodded. "I suppose you can fool everyone with some trick in every profession, but a Communist must be above tricks. He has no right to resort to trickery."

Slightly offended, Vaska said that he had never resorted to trickery and never would. He had, of course, taken no part in the 1905 Revolution nor even in the Civil War, but if a war ever broke out against the capitalists, as the papers wrote, he would go to the front as willingly as the others and would show what sort of a Communist he was. As for digesting the knowledge of all mankind, he would settle that by joining the Workers' Faculty. Yes, he would digest all that knowledge if need be. So what was all the row about?

"You're very lucky, I'm sorry I can't do that." Venka was envious.

"Why not?"

"Because. . . . In short, because I didn't study very well as a boy, though I had the chance to. Father worked at the railway and earned a good living. He wanted me to study, but I was too dreamy. I'd be listening to the teacher and get lost in my thoughts and forget everything he had been saying. After that, it was impossible to follow no matter how I tried, because I had missed the beginning; and finding that I understood nothing, I'd get very bored. That's why many teachers regarded me as a bit of a dunce."

Vaska laughed.

"There's nothing funny about it," said Venka. "Perhaps I'm not the only dunce of this kind. There may be many of us. Perhaps we must be taught

in a special way. As things are, they do their teaching like sheep shearing: all with the same scissors. Perhaps it will be different under Communism."

"There'll be many things under Communism," Vaska interrupted. "But we've got to catch all the bandits and thieves first and arrange things in such a way that nobody will steal or profiteer any more. Here we are talking about Communism, and someone stole all those fresh boards at the power station last night. I'm sure they've sold them to the private owners by now."

"Have you lodged a complaint about it?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Then we'll find them."

"It's not enough just to find the boards," said Vaska. "The thing is to stop all the stealing and swindling so that it can never happen again. But then there'll be nothing left for you and Venka to do if it all stops," Vaska laughed again. "What will you do, you and Venka? You'll be unemployed then."

"What makes you think so?" I said indignantly. "Venka can work as a fitter. He has worked at that job before. And I'll find something to do, I'm sure. Or I'll just go back to the Chikirev works."

"Not likely with the unemployment we're having everywhere," Vaska nodded towards the dark window-pane. "There are hundreds hanging about the labour exchange. There's no work to be had anywhere."

"But we're not going to have unemployment for ever, are we?"

"Not for ever, but still; my father has lost his job again." The thought of his father had put Vaska in mind of marriage. He had to marry most urgently. His family was in serious straits. His mother had died recently and his father, a stove-maker by trade, had taken to drink out of grief and was selling their last belongings on the market. His little sisters and brother were completely neglected. What should he do? He would have to marry to have a woman in the house. He had spotted a likely girl already, a pretty, tidy girl who had come to Dudari from some other district. A journalist was running after her now, pursuing her like a bloodhound and never giving anyone the chance to speak to her. She was a cashier.

Venka bent his head over the table, then got up and opened the bookcase as though looking for something.

"What cashier are you talking about?" I asked Vaska.

"You probably know her. She's the cashier at the grocery shop, the one that used to belong to Makhotkin. It's right opposite your station. Her name is Julia Maltseva."

It was frightfully annoying: even Vaska Tsaritsin had managed to get acquainted with the girl and was even going to marry her, while we. . . .

Venka must have been thinking the same.

"Well, I wish you good luck with that cashier," he said angrily, shutting the case.

"I'm afraid it won't come off," Vaska sighed. "Uzelkov the reporter accompanies her even to our rehearsals and sees her home as well. A real bloodhound, I tell you."

"What rehearsals?"

"At our drama circle, of course. We're having a dress rehearsal at the school. The play is about the Paris Commune, and Julia Maltseva, the cashier, is going to play the role of Madeleine Dudevant. Yuri Tikhonovich, our producer, calls her a delicious flower to her face. She's going to die on the barricades." Here Vaska glanced at our clock and turned pale. "Heavens, I'm late!" Winding a red scarf around his neck like a real actor, he put on his homely padded jacket and rushed for the door.

"You can have a look at the rehearsal if you like," he said at the door. "It's just a few steps from here. It's our first dress rehearsal."

"Let's go! Why not?" I suggested laughing. "It might be interesting."

"Let's!" Venka agreed.

## 7

The school was quite dark except for a little oil lamp on the second floor. We mounted the wooden stairs, passed down a corridor smelling of powder and singed hair and opened the auditorium door.

A bald man in a velvet blouse and white bow tie came up to us at once.

"Are you taking part? In the mass scenes?" he asked.

We had been accustomed to say when asked that we were from the criminal investigation department, but this time the department seemed quite out of place and we had no idea what mass scenes he meant. Our eyes roamed the hall and fastened on Julia Maltseva who could be seen very well through the half-open door. She was sitting before the looking glass, oblivious of us, and holding a pair of sooty curling irons over her head. So that was where that smell of singed hair and powder had come from!

There were no other girls about as far as we could see.

"If you're not, we beg to be excused," said the bald man with a theatrical scrape and bow. "We're having a rehearsal and strangers are not allowed."

We ought to have asked for Vaska Tsaritsin. He had invited us, after all, but somehow we did not dare; and we went away, crushed by the word: "strangers." Strangers were not allowed. Weren't we allowed everywhere if there was danger, if one stood a chance of getting crippled or killed? But here we were not allowed.

There was no reason to be gloomy about it, but still, we were.

While crossing the street, we caught a glimpse of Uzelkov's hareskin hat under a lamp. He must have been on his way to the rehearsal, to see Julia Maltseva home when it was over. He would be sure to be one of those allowed in. He would get anywhere he liked, that fellow. Others, too, would get in ahead of us wherever they liked: at the rehearsals, the drama circles and the Workers' Faculties. And they would be sure to marry nicer girls than we.

Yes, we would be too late everywhere. Everyone would be sure to get in ahead of us even if we were not more stupid or worse looking than others.

I had never yet been fonder of anyone than Julia Maltseva. Even now I am thrilled when I think of her as she was just under eighteen. I still remem-

ber those large, startled, quizzical yet kindly eyes and her soft wavy hair.

Yes, I can still remember all of her, both joyous and melancholy, indolent and agile, with that lithe strong body of hers.

But when I compared myself with Venka, as my potential rival, I was sure that it was with him and not with me that she ought to fall in love.

The two of us, if I remember correctly, joined the Comsomol at the same time and were assigned to crime investigation work at the same period too, though in different towns. We had read the same books. Our ages and experiences were almost the same. Yet, I considered him older, more intelligent, experienced and, most important, more a man of principle than I.

If not with me, then it was surely with Venka and by no means with Uzelkov that Julia Maltseva should have fallen in love.

Later in life, I was often to observe that beautiful women did not always marry handsome men. On the contrary, they were more inclined to marry such as Uzelkov, and, it seemed to me, did not much regret it afterwards.

But I felt bitterly about fate on that far-away, unusually lonely evening when we were barred from the rehearsal, and the pungent odour of singed hair and powder pursued us into the street.

I could not find anything to do for the rest of the evening. I was too restless to read or play draughts, and, besides, there was no one to play with. Venka had sat down to write a letter to his mother the moment we came home. It took him a long time. At last he sealed the envelop, put on his jacket and with an absent look on his face turned towards the door.

"Look here, Venka," I said. "I was just thinking that we have a poor kind of a job, worse than anybody else's, perhaps."

I must have interrupted his train of thought because he looked at me quite puzzled.

"Don't you like it? You can quit, you know."

"That's not the point," I answered, somewhat flustered. "Don't you think that we're something like lost souls. Now take a man like Uzelkov. He'll get in anywhere."

"I've heard enough of Uzelkov and I'm sick of him," said Venka and went off to post his letter.

When he returned, he undressed and went to bed. I, too, lay down, and put out the light.

"Suppose we won't join the Workers' Faculty," I said to him in the dark, "and just read the books they study there. Do you think we could get the same education that way?"

"We'll discuss it in the morning."

Our chief examined the aero-sledge next morning. Completely repaired and still smelling of fresh paint, it stood on the waste lot like a huge grasshopper.



"Now we can travel whenever we like," he said, fondly slapping its dark-green side. "In any kind of weather too. This will carry us to the very lair of the bear, the place where he least expects us."

"I'll vouch for its locomotive qualities," the mechanic assured, drying his hands on a ball of oakum. "In absolutely any locality!"

"Like Uzelkov," Venka winked to me. I was sure that he had been thinking about Uzelkov that night too, but was keeping quiet out of pride.

But now he was smiling as he mentioned the name, and I smiled too. We forgot about him at once.

We were too busy. The chief was mustering for an expedition to Voyevodsky Forest, to use his expression. Both Venka and I were about to go home to change for warmer clothes when we were accosted at the gate by Polyakov.

"I'd like to have another look at your shoulder, Comrade Malyshev. I want Doctor Ginsburg who has just arrived to see it too."

"There's no time Roman Fyodorovich," said Venka. "I've got to leave, this very minute."

"You'd better be careful," warned Polyakov. "I renounce all responsibility."

"Please do!" Venka shouted merrily.

We were thrilled with the prospect of a long journey on the sledge. Venka was afraid that Polyakov might prevent him from going if he examined his shoulder.

All troublesome thoughts were dismissed when, warmly dressed, we got into the wonderful sledge.

Resplendent in his leather coat, the mechanic fastened the two buttons of the helmet flaps under his chin, drew on his long brand-new gauntlets, stopped on the ribbed starter and moved a lever capped with bone. The sledge edged its way cautiously out of town and then started over the snow-bound wastes with a splutter and roar, leaving a triple track of broad skis in its wake.

There is no beauty on earth—so it seemed to me in my childhood, early youth and even now, though I have seen a good deal of the country—no beauty on earth which could compare with the magic loveliness of our grand Siberian landscapes.

Even in the winter, when the forests and rivers, the plains and hills are covered with snow and are in the grip of the bitterest frosts, the boundless expanses exhilarate, brace one and put one in an exalted frame of mind.

## 8

The great bears lay biding their time in their stuffy lairs somewhere in the depths of the taiga, in the impenetrable thickets, under cover of huge rosin-dripping tree trunks or boulders cracked by the rain, winds and frosts.

And biding his time too amid the snow lurked Kostya Vorontsov, ataman of his numerous but elusive band, the indomitable son of a rich

peasant, the "emperor of all of the taiga," as he half-jestingly called himself.

Only the bears' breath, crystallizing as fluffy glittering hoar, betrays the beds of their majestic repose; and these spots are given a wide berth by all the denizens of the taiga, the roes, the hares and the foxes. Just like the lairs of the bandits were given a wide berth by the villagers of the surrounding country.

But not everybody by far was shy of Kostya Vorontsov. On the contrary, there were some who looked to his band very hopefully. Perhaps Kostya would land firmly in the saddle one day; perhaps he would get help from abroad. Perhaps he would really come to be the "emperor of all of the taiga."

Nor was this the first year that he had survived the onslaughts of all sorts of shock units of the OGPU and criminal investigation department.

A special detachment of the OGPU had the previous summer severely mauled his band in Voyevodsky Forest itself and later in Kulominsk uyezd where they had fled to. It was generally believed that only sorry remnants of his gang had escaped, a small group which could easily be mopped up by the criminal investigation men. The OGPU special detachment, therefore, had moved farther east to fight still other and larger bands.

Besides, there were rumours towards the end of the summer that Vorontsov had been drowned while trying to cross a river and that fishermen had found the corpse somewhere. Such, at any rate, was the gist of an article in the gubernia newspaper. It also argued that banditry as such would soon be liquidated.

Vorontsov, however, knew better and turned up at Voyevodsky Forest again late in the autumn.

Wintering in these familiar parts, he had rallied the remnants of the routed bands, big and small, groups that were led by former officers of the Kolchak army.

Perhaps Vorontsov knew some magic of invisibility. Perhaps he would yet come into his own. And then, who could tell; there might be some changes in Moscow itself. Perhaps everything would return to the old order?

The rich Siberian peasants were desperate to return to the old order.

They did not express their hopes openly, however, and tried to pretend that politics were no concern of theirs. "We are just simple, ignorant people of the taiga," they would say. "Let the people in the cities decide which politics are better. We are concerned only with raising wheat, distilling tar, making charcoal, hunting for fur, and rafting timber down the rapid rivers."

The timber had been shipped even to England. As for the fur, it was gladly received by France, Germany and America, too. Life was not really bad in Voyevodsky Forest, though not everyone lived well, of course. There were rich and poor in the district as everywhere and there were more poor than rich.

The poor might have liked Soviet power, if it had done for them what it had done for the poor peasants of Central Russia. But it could not divide the landed estates for the simple reason that there weren't any in these regions.

Thus far, Soviet power had taken from the people more than it had given, and this could not be helped. It had to have grain first and foremost to save the starving people of the central gubernias.

It had promised cheap printed calico and cotton, kerosene and salt in exchange, and that very soon. Thus far, it had been unable to keep its promises. This new power which had routed Kolchak in Siberia had got down to building its economy only a short time ago. Its shortcomings, miscalculations and inexperience were more conspicuous than its advantages.

The enemies of the new power made the best of this, terrifying the illiterate and superstitious with talk of disasters to come.

"Here cometh Satan in human image," a village priest would declare from his pulpit and then go on to identify Satan with all that was new and that had come to life with Soviet power.

New schools, reading-rooms and first-aid posts organized in the remotest parts of the taiga in the first years of Soviet power were declared to be the works of Satan, mirages conjured up by the evil one.

Things were not at all easy for the pioneers of the new order, or for those who sympathized with it. There was talk on the market places and in the co-operative stores about how Kostya Vorontsov was chastizing the active supporters of Soviet power, mercilessly exterminating the members of the village soviets and the co-operatives, the village librarians and visiting lecturers, everybody who had come to spread Soviet power.

And Soviet power was not yet able to punish him for this, try as it would! He had taken cover in the safest thickets of the taiga and neither horse nor man could reach him in those deep snows.

There had been a bewildering quantity of snow that winter, but it was now packed hard in the fields and taiga clearings—a sure sign that spring was near.

The foxes, lynxes and wolverenes had already held their uproarious wedding parties with endless fighting, barking and miauling.

The bears would soon stir awkwardly in their lairs, scratch themselves and scrape the pads of their paws with their claws.

Soon the snow would sag, turn brownish and melt.

The bears would then come out into the open in search of the nutritious bear's root, a kind of bulb that grows in hidden places on the mossy side of the rocks. The blue pasque-flower and the buds of young aspens would flower too. In short, there would be everything that a bear could desire in the first days of spring; and it would be all ready and waiting for him.

The confederates of the bandits, the rich villagers who lived undisturbed, would also be sure to have everything ready for Kostya Vorontsov; ammunition, food and good horses. They would also draw up the lists of those whom the "emperor of all of the taiga" was to strike dead for their hopes for a better life.

And that was the time we chose to visit Voyevodsky Forest. We did not expect to track Kostya Vorontsov to his lair—we were not strong enough for

that—we meant to acquaint ourselves with the conditions in which he would be operating in spring, summer and late autumn.

Meanwhile, the plains, hillsides and tree crowns still glittered under the snow tinged with blue. When our aero-sledge was zooming up the hill we caught glimpses of villages and homesteads darkly overhanging the banks of immobile rivers, their chimneys emitting wisps of bluish smoke. We would have liked to think that life proceeded peacefully under those roofs, but knew that it was not so.

A young teacher who had come to our district recently had been crucified in the village of Skazyvaeva, just there at the edge of the forest. She had wanted to organize a Comsomol group, they said, and that had been all we could learn about it.

Senior militiaman Semyon Vorobyov who had come on the scene riding his shaggy little mare found her already dead, her naked body still nailed to the cross. The murderers had escaped and he had been unable to find any tracks to the taiga where the bands had presumably been hiding. He had been no luckier in the villages of Machayevo, Kholmogory and Varnaki where criminals had murdered a visiting doctor who had exposed the local quacks, they had also burnt the librarian in his reading-room, hanged the village correspondent and drowned two active women delegates in a hole in the ice.

The trouble was that senior militiaman Vorobyov could not manage to cover the whole of his immense beat, larger than two Switzerlands, as the lecturers were wont to put it. Vorobyov invariably came upon the scene after the crime had been committed. And what could he have done anyway, a senior militiaman without juniors to help him! Soviet power lacked the means to maintain numerous staffs, and in his dangerous duties Vorobyov could rely only on the activists among the population. They were few in numbers, but still carrying on—earnest brave men who helped Vorobyov of their own will.

After the war plenty of weapons had been left in the villages and homesteads in the possession of both those who helped the bandits and those who fought them.

Vorobyov was studying the population all the time, trying to learn the story of each villager, but things did not go well with him.

Halting our sledge at the edge of Dymok Village, our chief summoned Vorobyov, put on his spectacles and searched through the protocols of previous interrogations drawn up by the senior militiaman. He was wheezing angrily, his heavy frosted brows closely knit.

“Why do you write these things, Vorobyov?” he asked finally.

“How do you mean, why? To present them, of course.”

“That’s just it! That’s all they’ve been written for. What does this imply? It implies that you’re not worth your salt, that you do not justify your mission.”

“No, I do not,” Vorobyov mournfully agreed. “I feel it myself. If I did, you wouldn’t be here on this noisy machine. I would catch Kostya Vorontsov myself if it were only within my power and possibilities.”

"So you admit it?"

"Yes."

"Then climb into our sledge and join us."

Vorobyov's eyes stood out with fright.

A fearless man in all other ways, one who had been shot at more than once and healed his wounds with herbs alone, he now sat in the sledge clutching the edge of his seat with both hands and trembling as in a fever.

He recovered his composure only when the sledge had skirted the enormous plain and came to a halt. The chief ordered us to take to our skis, and make our way noiselessly to the farmsteads where, according to Vorobyov, the inveterate accomplices of Vorontsov lived.

Klanya Zvyagina and Anfisa Bolshakova, two of Kostya's sweethearts, lived respectively at Raspopino and Puzyryovo Lake.

It was said that he did not live with Anfisa any more. He had deserted her last summer. As to Klanya, Vorontsov was going to marry her officially, Vorobyov said. She was a true beauty! A juicy berry of a girl, a real wildfire! We had no intention to arrest Kostya's sweethearts, and even left Vorobyov behind to avoid frightening anyone with his brand-new militiaman's uniform. The chief, the mechanic and he stayed behind with the sledge, while we skied off in pairs heading for the farmsteads far and near.

We had received much intelligence from Voyevodsky Forest recently and, as not all the material had been adequately checked, this was a good opportunity to do so.

It would also give us the chance partly to test the evidence given by the arrested bandits. All those pains we had taken over the remnants of Klochkov's band had not been quite useless. We had managed to pump something out of them after all. Even Lazar Baukin could not have invented everything he told us before he escaped. That was impossible.

I trusted Venka implicitly and was indeed supposed to, since he was the assistant chief of the secret operative section. His memory had retained dozens of names, places and facts. He was confidently darting on ahead on his short, broad skis over the snowy wastes at the very edge of the taiga, now descending in a hollow, now emerging on a gentle slope.

"Let's take the short cut to Raspopino," he consulted for the sake of appearances. "We could stop at Shumilovo on the way."

"It's a good idea," I answered, though I did not know where either Raspopino or Shumilovo lay.

I had been to Voyevodsky Forest only once, the previous summer during an unsuccessful operation when two of our men were killed. But that had happened somewhere near the highroad, near the village of Gudnosovo, if I remembered correctly, and now we had probably got to the very heart of Voyevodsky Forest.

Venka's skis were crunching and whining up ahead as he cut a trail through the virgin snow, while mine glided almost noiselessly along the

ready-made track. He was propelling himself forward with only one stick, keeping the other under his arm. His shoulder must have been hurting him.

"Perhaps we ought to rest for a while," I said, overtaking him.

"Are you tired?"

"No, but how about your shoulder? . . ."

"Never mind my shoulder," he scoffed, gliding down another slope. "Just look at those smoking chimneys!" he cried joyfully. "That must be Shumilovo. We've eight versts to Raspopino. Though perhaps more. It's only the custom to say it's eight. Actually, it's more like twelve."

We had descended a steep incline and suddenly came upon the acrid smell of burning alcohol, so strange in this cold clear air. Mixed with it was the heavy nauseating odour of fermented grain.

"The scoundrels!" Venka snorted, coming to a halt.

We had got rid of nearly all the illegal distillers in Dudari and the neighbouring villages. If there was any distilling left, it was being done in strictest secrecy so that no smells could penetrate to the street.

But here the distillers seemed to be having things their own way. There was no one to disturb them.

We had no intention of disturbing them either and were heading for Shumilovo to make some inquiries, as Venka put it.

I waited in the open while Venka entered the cottages. There were only ten, thank God, and he did not enter all of them. I had no idea of what he was talking about in those houses, but could guess.

He spent about twenty minutes in one of the cottages and came out rather flustered.

"I don't know whether she's telling the truth or not but she swears that she has seen no trace of her husband."

"Who's he?"

"Lazar Baukin. Have you forgotten him? This is his house."

I looked with surprise at the snow-laden cottage with its window ledges all awry and dilapidated porch.

"And she was given a horse recently!" Venka said. "That is, not given, but sold at a low price as to a poor peasant. They probably did not know that her husband is a bandit."

Venka then entered a cottage at the very edge of the village, while I stood looking at Baukin's roof, the surrounding outbuildings, the broken gatewings hinged on their heavy posts of larch logs set up perhaps half a century ago. It was clear that the master of the house had been away for a long time.

At last Venka emerged from the cottage with a tall peasant in an unbelted homespun shirt, his dark beard singed on one side, behind him. They were still talking in undertones.

"Where did you singe your beard that way?" Venka asked, stepping from the porch. "At the still?"



"What do you suppose? The devil take that contraption!"

The peasant laughed and I saw that he was drunk. It had evidently not occurred to him that we might be from the criminal investigation department or he would have known better than to confess singeing his beard in such a way.

"Aren't you afraid of Vorobyov, the militiaman?" asked Venka, regaining his skis.

"Well, he is a nuisance sometimes. He was here only last week and wanted to fine us. 'I'll run you in,' he told us. May the next goat he meets ram him in the pants!"

No one had paid the slightest attention to us either in Zhaleika or in Karachai where we stopped for a short time.

9

It was only in Raspopino that the inhabitants called us by the modish term "representatives" after the older men had had a short talk with Venka.

"Aunt Matryona, come to our house quickly," shrilled a chit of a girl, running from a porch, her bare knees flashing over enormous felt boots. "The representatives are here. They're going to hold a talk."

And so, after a ski run of ten or fifteen versts across the virgin snow, Venka and I found ourselves in a large warm room filled with the odour of dry mushrooms, herbs, freshly tanned sheepskin and baked bread.

There were all sorts of people around, old and young, men and women, staid farmers with earnest yet kindly faces.

To look at them one would never think there were bandits or abettors of bandits among them, men capable of making a wooden cross and crucifying a young school mistress, in cold blood. They were not all bandits, of course. Still, some of them were, and we kept our eyes wide open while talking to them. We had taken seats in different parts of the room, Venka in the corner under the old icons illuminated by an unusually large oil lamp in a bronze holder, while I sat on a broad, well-scraped bench near the door. In the event of danger, we would not be caught together in the midst of this seemingly good-humoured yet very alert company.

Venka did most of the talking. The thought uppermost in my mind was to get away from here and move on while there was still light. Perhaps we could see Klanya Zvyagina before the day was over. Could she be really as pretty as Vorobyov claimed?

There were in fact quite a few pretty faces there in the room. It was even painful to think that, living as they did so far from everyone, hardly anybody would ever get the chance to see them. It would be a good idea, I thought, to take at least one of them to Irkutsk, Krasnoyarsk, Novo-Nikolayevsk and even to Moscow to show the people what beauties can be found in the heart of the Siberian taiga, lovely young women who had been raised in the clear air of these great spaces and fed on the creamy milk fragrant with grass and flowers.

The room grew gradually crowded. People stood about pressed together along the walls or leaning heavily on the table occupied by Venka and the hosts: a venerable old man with a sparse grey goatee and a bald head shining as though it had been greased, his young, greedy-eyed daughter wearing a red polka-dotted blouse, and his old woman, grim and bony and breathing open-mouthed, showing a solitary yellow tooth in her lower gum.

It grew hot and stuffy.

Examining them one by one, I wondered who each of them was and what his mood could really be? Was he plotting some devilry against us? Was he armed or not?

Those were hard things to guess.

Judging by the talk at meetings and the newspaper reports, the bandits were being supported by the kulaks. The impressions we had gathered from talks and reports were correct, of course, but we knew for certain that there were many poor peasants and ex-soldiers both among the bandits and their abettors. We knew that there were some who had even fought for Soviet power in the Civil War, but had gone another way after they returned to their taiga farmsteads, led astray by the kulaks' agitation and threats.



Monstrous stories about Soviet power were still bandied about in the taiga villages, because not everybody by far understood its true purposes.

Venka was doing the right thing, therefore, by telling the company, no matter who they were—kulaks or kulak helpers—about the latest decisions of Soviet power. Yet, I was nervous. It seemed to me that he did not need to go into such detail. We were pressed for time and would probably never reach the farthest farmsteads before dark. And it was dangerous to travel by night.

"But what is to happen to our womenfolk, my dear boy?" asked the host, stroking his bare skull with a knotted hand. "I've heard it said, how true it is I don't know, that they will be taken to the communias for the enjoyment of the commissars, so to speak."

Venka explained that that was all nonsense. Soviet power, on the contrary, had every sympathy for the peasant women and even insisted that they should be called women and not "babas"<sup>1</sup>. The womenfolk of the peasants had often been wronged under the tsars, but Soviet power would not permit such a thing.

Pleased, the women in the room exchanged smiles. It was obvious that Venka's manner appealed to them. And why shouldn't they like this gay, blue-eyed, fair-haired fellow with a manly chest and easy, confident manner?

Venka, too, must have felt that his listeners were regarding him with pleasure and, infected by this, warmed to his subject more and more. I was growing annoyed but could not help being impressed by the self-assurance with which he talked about everything, quoting Lenin's speeches from the newspapers.

"Lenin? Why, isn't he a German?" the host interjected.

"Now who told you such nonsense?"

"Why, a student came here last time, a representative like you, and he explained to us that Lenin was a German."

Cautiously, we began to sound the company as to the identity of the student. What was his name, where had he come from and what else had he said? It was clear that he must have been a representative of the bandits. This was a new angle: the bandits not only spent their time plundering and killing people, but also sent their agitators to the villages even in winter, while we were waiting for the spring in Dudari. Not very good work on our part, was it?

"That student told you a pack of lies," Venka said. "I consider him one of the worst enemies of Soviet power."

"How are we to know who is a friend and who an enemy?" said the host apologetically. "We never ask anyone for their documents, and the village soviet is far away. That village soviet besides, is quite worthless—a power only in name."

"Any power is good for us if it does nothing to wrong us," added a dry neat old man, sitting on the bench near me. "It's the forest that keeps us alive, our taiga."

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<sup>1</sup> Baba—wench.

Venka at once seized upon this and explained how Soviet power would change the taiga in time. The scientists were writing even now that great wealth lay right here, under our feet: iron ore, coal and gold. Soviet power would take all this into its hands and build many factories and towns here.

"So that's how it is?" The little old man at my side sounded surprised. "And where are you going to put us, my dear young man?"

"They'll make soap out of you, Grandpa," a voice said. "All the old men will go for soap!"

There was a burst of laughter.

"For soap?" asked the old man, evidently hard of hearing.

"For soap! For soap!" somebody repeated. An elderly curly-headed man with angry eyes and a round-cut red beard stepped forward from the window.

Was I seeing right? The man looked just like Lazar Baukin. Was it possible that he could be standing there so calmly, mocking us? Surely, he could not help knowing who we were.

Venka was slightly flustered too when he saw him, but went on to tell of the things we had ourselves heard but recently at one of the talks given by a visiting lecturer at the Paris Commune Club. Venka described the factories that would spring up at the farthestmost ends of the taiga.

"But where will the birds and the animals go?" asked the same hard-hearing little old man.

There was another burst of laughter.

"Birds and animals?" said Venka.

I knew that he had not the faintest idea where they would go once the factories appeared. There had been no mention of that in the lecture at the club. What was the point of getting involved in this talk about birds and animals? There was no time and the short winter day was on the wane. We didn't even know for certain where we were to spend the night.

We were supposed to pass through Devichi Dvor and Petukhov Yar and spend the night in Bolshiye Vyselki so that we could go on to Prokazovo in the morning and rejoin the chief. But we were seriously behind schedule.

"Nobody will destroy the birds and the animals," said Venka authoritatively. "There will be birds and animals in the forests even under complete Socialism."

"And what about the bandits?"

The question was put by a young, rosy-cheeked woman in a bright kerchief drawn to the brows over her pert, laughing eyes.

"Are there many of them here?" Venka asked, pretending surprise.

"There are some," she answered evasively. "They're everywhere, you know."

"You won't get rid of them so soon, not likely," sighed the little old man. "You'll find it easier to destroy all the birds and the animals. Those bandits are hard to kill. Even Soviet power is afraid of them."

Venka smiled at this, or rather forced himself to smile.

"Is it really?"



"It is," the old man affirmed. "It is afraid of them, so help me God! Three young fellows like you came here from Dudari in December. They came to collect the food surpluses. The only thing they didn't have about them was a cannon. The rest was all there: ammunition belts, hand-grenades and pistols. And they were so quick about everything, too. They didn't talk much either. They wanted to ski out of here as soon as they could. We tried to ask them some questions, but they only answered that they were in a hurry to reach the village soviet."

"They were just scamps," suggested Venka. "Afraid of their own shadows."

"Scamps or no scamps, nobody cares to die," the host cut in. "We're having our fifth village soviet chairman this year. Two were killed and two refused the office themselves. The fifth is shivering in his skin and even afraid to put his nose out of doors."

"That's a serious matter," said Venka.

"As serious as can be," agreed the host, helplessly spreading his hands and watching Venka and me very attentively. "I see you have no weapons on you. Here you are, representatives, with nothing to defend yourselves with."

"Not a thing," Venka laughed.

"You must be brave?"

"That's because they haven't been knocked about yet," a voice suggested from the corner, and there was general laughter.

"This is no laughing matter," insisted the host frowning. "Milentyev's daughter-in-law has told us that on Saturday Vorontsov's order was read to her in the co-operative store at Petukhov Yar. It was written by a special ma-

chine and pasted on the doors. The order said that a red star would be cut on every Communist's chest and back with a sharp razor."

"I see. So Kostya is in hiding somewhere, but the orders are coming straight from him, and even written by a special machine."

"Gospel truth—on a special machine called a typewriter! He raided the offices of the gold mine last year and came away with many things and with that machine as well. Now he types everything so that everyone should understand him better."

"They act with impunity, you might say," epitomized a kindly man with a bald crown framed in long hair which flowed down behind his ears. He looked like a deacon. He spoke with more glee than sorrow.

"It has been written in the newspapers that Klochkov was killed in Zolotaya Pad and that fourteen of his bandits got away." (Not fourteen, but three, I was about to interject, but thought better of it. Venka, too, held his tongue). "Now where do you think they went? Straight to Vorontsov! He really is 'the emperor of all of the taiga,' there's no denying it."

I pretended to be absorbed in my felt boots, but then looked up and noticed the curly-headed peasant with the round red beard, the one who had said that the old men would be consigned to the soap factories. He was Venka's "godfather" and no other, the same Lazar Baukin who had escaped from our bath-house. He knew how many bandits had escaped on that occasion and could have corrected the figure. Instead, he just stood there smiling at us maliciously. He looked better than in the days when we met him first; healthy and well-dressed. He wore a new padded jacket revealing a clean linen shirt with large white buttons at the collar. Evidently he was living well and had nothing to be afraid of.

He stood near and I was able to study him conveniently from behind the two or three men between.

But he must have felt my gaze at last, because he put on his large bear-skin hat and left the room.

## 10

The blue of the twilight was deepening outside. We should have been on our way to Bolshiye Vyselki long ago. We had been sitting in that house too long and to no good purpose.

Venka was now answering questions about the taxes. I was fed up with it all. Was this the time to talk about the taxes? Once more, they asked him about the factories which might spring up in the taiga. Perhaps it would never happen? What was more likely to happen was that Lazar Baukin, the red-bearded bandit, would be laying an ambush for us somewhere. And not alone, but with his company, so that we would never live to see any new towns or factories at all. Nor Socialism either. I was angry.

The host's daughter in the polka-dotted red blouse begged us to have tea or at least some milk.

"We could do with some milk," Venka agreed.

And there we were, drinking milk, while it was getting darker and darker outside. Could Venka be thinking of spending the night here? Apparently not, because he finished his milk, wiped his lips with the back of his hand, thanked his hosts and said good-bye. I took leave too and followed Venka into the dark. We walked along silently for some time, our skis over our shoulders. It was a pleasure to breathe the fresh frosty air after all those hours in the stuffy house.

"It's outrageous!" exclaimed Venka when we passed the dimly-lit windows of the last house. "Absolutely outrageous! Some run-away student came here and filled them with all sorts of rot. You'd think it was the most natural thing for him to do. You'd think there was no Soviet power at all! What a mess! It's hard to believe that villages could live like this!—as if they were forgotten islands. There is no one to talk to the people or explain things to them. It's good you and I talked to them a little."

"Yes, a little," I scoffed, still angry because we had been sitting about all day and were now travelling in the dark, God knows where. "I don't think we're here to do all that talking. It's not our business."

"Whose business is it then?" Venka was growing angry too. "Don't you think it is your duty to talk to people? As a Comsomol member?"

"In general, yes, but we haven't come here for that."

"And what have we come for?"

"How do I know? I thought the chief or you had some plan or other."

"And have you got a plan?" Venka even stopped as if to bar the way. His eyes were shining in the dark. "Well, have you?"

"What are you picking on me for? I have nothing to do with the plan. If you'd ask for my opinion, I'd have acted differently."

"How then?"

"I would have brought all those military school trainees, surrounded every farmstead, strung the men out along the nearest forest edge and then started drumming them out."

"Whom? The villagers?"

"Why the villagers? The bandits of course."

"How do you know there are any bandits here?" asked Venka laying his skis on the snow.

"That's not hard to guess," I said unslinging my skis. "That red-bearded godfather of yours is walking about free and cracking jokes at our expense. There's nothing we can do to him, while he. . . ."

I was about to say that Baukin might be lying in wait for us somewhere right now, but held my tongue. Venka must have known this himself and if I were to mention it now, he might think I was getting the wind up, or just trying to frighten him.

I pretended to be fumbling with the ski-strap and let fly a string of oaths to cut short the conversation.

Venka laughed. Perhaps he guessed what was the matter—that I was afraid and still more afraid to admit it.

We were heading for the forest now. It loomed black and looked not so much a forest as a tall stone rampart with towers topped with crosses behind it.

"Who do you think our host was in that cottage?" Venka asked.

"Judging by everything, he's a kulak."

"If he were nothing more than a kulak, it wouldn't matter. He was Yelizar Dementyevich Ustsov, a prominent bandit confederate. And do you remember that old man who ran down the bandits? He's also a bandit supporter. His name is Yenyutin and his son was a member of Klochkov's band. We killed him at Zolotaya Pad."

"That's right. It was definitely established that one of the dead men was Yenyutin."

"Ustsov also lost his son-in-law. His daughter, the one in the red blouse, is the widow of a bandit. Her husband was killed last year. And to listen to them, you'd think they were sorry for the birds and the animals."

"And you decided to have a heart-to-heart talk with them and explain things."

"It was not to them that I was talking. There were all sorts of peasants in the room. It's just too bad no one cares to talk to them. We're fine ones, we are! We've been fussing about for two years with hardly any result."

"Those old men never guessed who we were and where we came from."

"Of course they did," Venka laughed. "They're no fools. That's why they asked us if we were armed. They praised us for our courage to frighten us. They're double-dealers with double meanings to their words. You've got to watch your step with them."

Venka visibly brightened for some reason. He produced a rusk of rye bread, snapped it in two and gave me half. The rusk had been sprinkled with large grains of salt, half-melted in the bread. It was a pleasure to nibble and suck at it just then.

"I've got some cottage cheese, too," announced Venka, handing me my share.

"What's the hurry?" I objected, trying to prevent such extravagance. "We had milk only a little while ago and we've a great distance to go. If we eat it all, we'll be sorry later on."

"Don't worry, we won't," Venka laughed. "We're just a few versts from Bolshiye Vyselki. We'll get there quickly enough on our skis—in about two hours. I covered this stretch in summer, though in a cart."

"How is your shoulder?"

"All right. Seems to be better. It hurts a little when I take the ski-sticks, but otherwise it's all right."

We were avoiding the well-packed snow of the road glistening in the dark and were skiing at some distance from the edge.

"Did you notice that fat-faced woman in the coloured kerchief?" Venka asked.

"Which one do you mean?"

"The one who sat opposite me, the one with the rosy face and black saucy eyes. She was the one who mentioned the bandits when we were talking about the birds and the animals."

"Ah, the one with the kerchief down to the eyes?"

"She is Anfisa Bolshakova, the 'emperor's' sweetheart. He's given her up, they say."

"Is that so? Was it she?" I was sorry I hadn't had a better look at the woman. But then, I had been too anxious to see Klanya Zvyagina, so rapturously praised by Senior Militiaman Vorobyov. She lived somewhere near Puzyryovo Lake, he said.

"Is Puzyryovo Lake far from here? Do you think we could reach it tonight?"

"No, of course not. It's very far. We'll be lucky if we reach Bolshiye Vyselki," answered Venka quickening the pace.

Perhaps his shoulder really did not hurt him any more or he was just trying to keep his spirits up? Whichever it was, I had to work hard to keep the pace as I flew after him over the slippery thawing snow. I wished we would really reach Bolshiye Vyselki soon. I was so tired that my skis seemed to be parting ways under me; and it was beginning to blow.

"There's a blizzard coming, I think."

"Yes," answered Venka. "But we'll soon be there. It's very near now. The main thing is to stick to the road. It's as straight as an arrow here."

The road had been skirting the taiga alive with discordant voices. It was as though there were people murmuring somewhere in the thickets, as though wolves were howling and huge cats caterwauling. But it only seemed so; there was nothing there, of course.

It was certain, at any rate, that there was no one near the farmsteads and out along the road. How could there be at such a time? Why work oneself up that way? Fear is liable to make one see all sorts of things. Yes, that was the principle: never work yourself up. It was only the fir-trees howling in the wind as always and the naked twigs of the birch-trees swishing and the shaggy branches of the pines cracking and breaking away on all sides. That was where all those frightening noises came from.

"How are you doing?" Venka looked back.

"I'm all right."

"Get a move on! It's near now. We'll reach the place before the storm. We'll have a good sleep there. Or perhaps even talk to somebody. There are some of our people in Vyselki—that is, if they're still alive."

There was a dark blot on the road. It seemed to be moving. Yes, it was moving. Horses perhaps? If they were, we might get a lift to Bolshiye Vyselki.

It was mere bravado on Venka's part. I couldn't believe that his shoulder had healed so quickly. No, it was just bravado. And to think that we would have to keep skiing all day tomorrow and the day after as well!

The black figures on the road turned out to be people and not horses.

"Is that you, Veniamin?" a raucous voice called on the road.

"It's me," answered Venka stooping to take off his skis.

I recognized Lazar Baukin's voice at once. Now I could clearly see his bearskin hat as big as a cauldron.

I also removed my skis and followed Venka to the road.

"We'll do no talking while he's around!" Baukin pointed at me. A cigarette stub clung to his lips. When it glowed brighter as he puffed at it, I could see the angry glitter of his eyes.

Two other men stood near. I saw only their silhouettes and could not tell whether they were young or old, or whether those were sticks or sawed-off shotguns they were carrying.

"You wait here," said Venka as he went off with Lazar to the other side of the road flanked by the ragged walls of the muttering forest.

The two others followed them into the forest soon afterwards. Those were sawed-off shotguns they were carrying after all, or just ordinary shotguns. As for me, I did not budge.

I was not worrying about the blizzard any more, only about Venka and myself, too.

The Colt in my belt under the wadded jacket fitted so snugly that the people in Raspopino never noticed we were armed. They had even expressed some hypocritical pity on this score. But their pity was uncalled for. I loosened the Colt and thrust it against my breast. Anything might happen.

Venka was asking for trouble, whichever way you looked at it. If Lazar wanted to speak to him so confidentially that even I could not be present, why had those two men gone after them? Perhaps they had gone across the road to do him in? But then, why not me too? Perhaps there were more of them, watchers whom I couldn't see? Perhaps they would attend to me later?

All sorts of unpleasant prospects crossed my mind. But I knew by experience that it was necessary to keep imagination in check if one was not to be ashamed of oneself afterwards. Come what may, I had to stick it out. I was trying hard to remember the funniest thing that had ever happened to me, anything to cheer me up, but could not though I stood waiting a long time.

Venka at last came into view and called to me. There was no sign of Lazar Baukin and his companions. Perhaps they had gone on deeper into the forest. Perhaps they lived there? It was quieter in the heart of the woods. Only the tree tops were sighing above and it was very still down below. But on the road, the blizzard was blowing fiercely, stinging our faces with icy grains. Even Venka was impressed:

"Filthy weather! It's almost impossible to go on."

Now it was my turn to reassure him:

"Never mind! Didn't you say that Bolshiye Vyselki was near? We'll get there somehow."

"It's not far, of course," Venka agreed, "but there is no point in going on to Vyselki. We'll take a short cut to Puzyryovo Lake."



I could have reminded Venka that he had himself told me that Puzyryovo Lake was too far to reach that day, but held my tongue. He wasn't asking for my advice. Our relations now were not just those of a pair of pals, but of superior and subordinate. There was nothing to say. Let it be Puzyryovo. What did I care after all? Was I the senior assistant chief of the secret operative section? I did not even ask what he had been talking about with Lazar Baukin. I merely stood watching as he buttoned his jacket and tightened his belt, and then did the same.

"Let's go," he said finally. "Every minute counts now. We'd had to keep going for five hours if the weather were good, but in this soup I can't tell just how long it will take. But we have to go on. The point is, Lazar has given us a valuable clue. We'd be fools to do nothing about it. Perhaps the going will be easier on the other side of the road."

Springing across the ditch, he regained his skis and darted off ahead without another word.

He was still using only one stick, keeping the other under his arm. His shoulder must have been hurting after all, but he was reluctant to admit it. It was hard to breathe, let alone to speak. We were running in the teeth of the blizzard, or rather not running but crawling.

At last, we managed to round a large section of the wood.

Venka then turned to the right and we entered an elongated clearing much like an avenue. The driving snow was slapping at our backs now and it was easier to breathe.

"I'm glad we had that milk," said Venka. "It's not easy to go so far on an empty stomach."

"Is it still far?"

"It is."

I turned back my stiff, frozen sleeve and let the torch play on my watch. It was after eight—twenty minutes past eight. We had been travelling three hours, and how long would we have to keep going?

Our avenue opened upon a broad clearing where the full fury of the blizzard caught us. Venka suddenly halted and sat down on his heels. One of his ski-straps had snapped. I got down next to him as he sat on the snow and wanted to switch on my torch.

"Don't," he said. "We're in the open here and a light is risky. I can see very well as it is. I have cat's eyes."

He took out a spare leather strap, cut a strip with his knife and fastened it in place.

"That was a good rest," he laughed, getting up and slipping his feet into the ski-straps. "We can go on now. 'You're lucky to have such weather,' Baukin told me, 'Klanya Zvyagina will be waiting for you.'"

Why should she be waiting for us? I wondered. How could she know that we were coming or who we were, for that matter? What interested me even more was that Venka seemed to have regained his trust in Baukin, though tricked by him once. Baukin would surely trick him again. It was clear

that Venka was sticking out his neck—and not only his, but mine too — it ought to have occurred to me, but didn't. Perhaps I was too alarmed at the prospect of being left behind in that tossing white wilderness in the dark.

I was going to see Klanya Zvyagina at last, but the thought was not nearly as exciting as a short time before.

We fought our way across the clearing in the face of a mounting wind which felt as if it were slashing our faces with powdered glass. I could hardly keep on my feet. I had never seen such a storm before. Finally, I halted and almost toppled over as I shouted: "Hold on Venka! Hold on—do you hear?"

"What's up?"

"I've got to fasten my hat down to keep the wind out of my face. The snow is blinding me."

"Never mind!" shouted Venka. "We'll be running into another alley soon."

"Have we still far to go?"

"Rather."

We were pushing uphill through the alley now. The top was quite bald. Not a stick of brush anywhere. But below we could see lights flickering even through the blizzard. The village could not be far now. Mustering my last strength, I felt happy for a moment. We'd be there very soon and find a place to get warm no matter what happened. There might even be a cup of tea.

The lights were growing more distinct and we could hear the barking of dogs. They could not know, those dogs, how glad we were to hear them. Let them yap as fiercely as they liked.

We were making straight for the dogs. They were probably behind the high fence in our path. The masters of the house were still up, it seemed, and I wondered at which gate Venka would stop.

We were moving along the tall fence, the kind that generally belongs to rich peasants. Judging by the barking, there were two dogs or perhaps three. Evidently their master had something worth guarding. The dogs were dashing the full length of their rattling chains.

If only we could stop at this gate! The master would call off the dogs and we would get in, out of the wind. But no! Venka was heading for another place.

We had passed several houses and were out in the open again, at the mercy of the tossing, whirling blizzard.

I could not help looking back. The lights were now barely visible behind us. The barking could still be heard and ahead of us lay impenetrable darkness loaded with icy grape-shot.

"Not too tired?" Venka shouted.

"Not very," I answered.

But that was a downright lie. I was not only tired, but half-dead. I didn't care about anything. I was pushing on like a sleep-walker. I could have flopped down to sleep anywhere, but still I followed Venka.

We were climbing another hill, not steep but high. We had in fact been ascending for a long time. Or had it just seemed so? I was pushing on like an old nag, with hanging head and bent almost double. Again I heard the barking of dogs and the rustling of chains, but did not care this time.

Suddenly, I bumped into Venka like a blind man. He had stopped and was waiting for me, his face, hat and shoulders shaggy with snow.

I must have looked the same, though I could not see myself, Venka looked like a snow-man or a Santa Claus.

"Now's the time to look sharp," he said snatching his hat off, and beating it against his felt boots to shake the snow off. "Here is where our work begins. Take your skis off. Not too tired?"

"No."

We passed a rather low fence behind which dogs were barking and stopped at a big cottage with closed shutters.

There were two similar houses nearby, and the three formed a triangle, as it were. Some other buildings, barns, cowsheds or stables, could be seen beyond. The houses with their fences or "zaplots" as they are called in Siberia faced the street.

Venka mounted the porch of the biggest of the houses and with his ski pole struck short raps and then another three on the door.

"Who's there?"

"Your kinsmen."

"Our kinsmen are all at home."

"You've forgotten Saveli who sends his regards."

The cross-bar inside was removed with a low rumble.

"You're welcome then," the young woman showed us into the passage. We couldn't see her in the dark, but felt the pleasant, slightly intoxicating odour of a young sleep-warmed body.

"I've been waiting for you for three hours. The weather is just right: a blizzard. But then I thought you would not come after all and went to bed."

"Who is at home?" Venka asked quite like a member of the family. He played his torch round the corners of the passage, looking for the birch switch to brush the snow off his felt boots.

"Grandfather, of course. Why? He's lying on the stove bunk, groaning because of the bad weather. It's frightening sometimes to be alone with him. It's like being with a ghost. Here you are," she said picking up the birch switch. "Let me brush your clothes for you. You're all covered with snow. You've come all the way from Samakha, haven't you?"

"Yes, from Samakha," Venka agreed, though we had never been near the place.

The young woman led us into the front room and lit the tin lamp on the wall. Now we could see that she was really very young, very beautiful, high-bosomed and graceful.

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"Take your things off, fellows," she said helping us out of our jerkins. "Let me have your boots too. I'll put them near the stove and they'll dry in a moment."

We pulled off our ice-bound boots and accepted two pairs of new galoshes instead.

"Put them on," she said. "I've just heated the stove and your feet will soon be warm."

She removed the thick, fringed table-cloth and replaced it with a white one.

"I've got some very good home-brew for you—as clear as tear-drops. I even treat grandfather with it once in a while. To keep up his spirits," she laughed.

"No, not just now," said Venka. "You'd better give us something to eat. We won't have any liquor now even if it's as good as you say. Too dangerous. There are too many spotters around and it's easy to get into trouble when you're drunk."

"I know," the handsome young woman nodded. Tossing one of her braids forward over her shoulder, she began to plait it with long fingers. "They say that lots of spotters have been coming here on some crazy machine. You can hear it sputtering all over Siberia, but today it broke down. It happened in the marshes at the foot of Prakhin Hill."

This took me by surprise. How could she have heard of our aero-sledge when we had arrived only this morning and stopped some thirty versts away. This was the work of the mysterious grape-vine of the taiga, or rather of the bandits!

Klanya set several slices of fragrant wheat bread before us, the kind we had not seen for a long time, then served up some smoked fish, cold meat and a dish of pickled mushrooms.

"Perhaps you'll have some of my vodka after all?" she asked again. "It wasn't bought, you know, it's home-made."

There was nothing I would have liked better. Why was Venka so fussy? Would one glass of the stuff make us drunk? Suppose I caught cold. My hands were still numb.

"I'll join you. We'll drink the health of Konstantin Ivanovich. To his sad, bitter happiness!"

"Well, let's do so," Venka agreed at last.

So he would not drink a glass just because we needed it, but only to the health of Vorontsov! If only the bandit leader knew who was drinking his health in such a blizzard! Drinking his health or his death?

She touched my glass and Venka's with her own.

"Do you know that I was quite surprised when I saw you first," she said looking into Venka's eyes. "You look so much like Konstantin Ivanovich himself. Not your face, but your figure. You're not as broad-shouldered as he, and you're younger too, but there is something about your figure. . . ."

"You're imagining things," Venka laughed as though he were pleased.

"No, it's true," she insisted. "I'll show you a photo of him when he was young, when we still had the tsar."

Taking another nip of her liquor, she went to the huge iron bound coffer plated with patterned tin. The lock clicked open as she turned the key and threw back the lid.

Reaching into the bowels of the coffer, she overturned some folded lengths of materials, various bundles and fur skins and at last extracted a photograph from the stuffiness of camphor.

We had never met Vorontsov, but had seen many photos of him before. This particular one was missing at the station.

Vorontsov, handsome and young in his officer's uniform, was here shown sitting back with legs spread, a sabre on his knees. A morose officer with high cheek-bones leaned over his shoulder; he too was holding a sabre.

"Now who's that?" Venka pointed to the other.

"Don't you recognize him?" the young woman was genuinely surprised. "That's Yevlampi Grigoryevich Klochkov."

"So it is, that's right!" Venka pretended to remember. "Of course it's Klochkov—only he got stout afterwards."

"He had a higher rank than Konstantin Ivanovich. Yet he regarded himself as his junior in wisdom. Everything was well when he was under Konstantin Ivanovich, but the moment he left and wanted to make war on his own, he got killed. The spotters killed him. 'I'll strangle a thousand commissars for Yevlampi,' Konstantin Ivanovich said. 'Just wait till I come out of the taiga in the spring.' You've probably heard him say it?"

"Yes, we've heard about it," Venka nodded.

"Let's drink to the peace of his soul," the young woman suggested. "To the peace of the soul of the slain Yevlampi Grigoryevich!"

"But does one drink to the peace of the soul?" Venka was dubious.

"One doesn't perhaps, but we will." She filled the glasses again. "'It's not as a woman that I love you, Klanya,' he used to say to me when he was in his cups, 'but purely as a vision.' He was fond of a joke, may he enter the Kingdom of Heaven!"

To think that we, a pair of Comsomol members, should drink the peace of the scoundrel staff captain Klochkov's soul! But drink we did.

The liquor had put her in a sadder frame of mind.

"I wonder what has happened to Konstantin Ivanovich," she sighed as she put the photograph back and locked the coffer. "He keeps sending me gifts all the time." Her eyes wandered significantly to the coffer. "But he hardly ever comes to see me now. Perhaps he doesn't want to see me any more?"

"Times are hard and it's difficult to get here, you know," said Venka.

"What's so difficult about it?" She sighed again. "I know that he was in Kapustino last week and that's only six versts from here. Or perhaps he has fallen for Lushka? They say she has been doing herself up very finely when he comes. He was on a three-day spree in Kapustino and Lushka was seen with him too. Do you know anything about Lushka? You'd better tell

me if you do I'll be your faithful servant for that. Speak up, if you know anything!"

"We know something about it, of course," said Venka evasively, "but can't tell you. Please don't ask us to. Why should we come between people?"

"I'll find out everything just the same!" she warned. "I'll pump Saveli himself. He'll tell me. Lazar Baukin will tell me too. He's a good friend. Only, Konstantin Ivanovich says that it's too early to trust him yet, that he should be tested first in some way. It was Saveli who told me to give clothes and shoes to Baukin when he got away from the spotters. He also asked me to take care of Baukin's friends. He told me to regard this as an order from Konstantin Ivanovich himself. What are you moaning up there for, grandpa?" She turned to the stove. "Are you thirsty? Or do you want to go out for a moment?"

"I ought to clip that tongue of yours," came a quaking, but as yet clear voice from the stove bunk. "It's much too long."

"My tongue is just as long as it was when I was born, grandfather, and you go to sleep. You make me tired with your grumbling. These men have come from Saveli on important business."

Who was Saveli? I was dying to know. Perhaps I knew him by his second name and not by his first. Many of the men belonging to Vorontsov were known to us already. It was not for nothing that we had been looking them up. Still, I had never heard of anyone by the name of Saveli.

And then, I was anxious too. Suppose this Saveli turned up all of a sudden—and not alone? This was good weather for a bandit's visit.

The blizzard was still raging outside and would probably continue all night. We'd be in a hot pickle if Saveli appeared.

But I was even more worried by the thought that Venka might take it into his head to push on to Bolshiye Vyselki or straight on to Prokazovo. I hadn't rested in the least. On the contrary, I had softened up from the warmth and the liquor. Could Venka really be thinking of going back into the blizzard? Grandfather again moaned on the stove top and murmured something. There came an odour of stale bedding.

"Pay no heed to him!" the young woman said with a glance at the stove. "He's hardly alive, can barely keep his body and soul together, but is still spying on me, as you might say. He used to be a district policeman. He came here all the way from Vladivostok to end his days in the taiga. He's not even a relative of mine. Just a godfather! But Saveli told me to take care of him. He might be useful some day, he said."

She tossed a linen dish towel over her shoulder and began to clear the table.

It was obvious that she liked order and tidiness. The room was very clean. While removing the things and talking to us, she kept looking at herself in the well-polished mirror on the wall over the table—stealing curious slanting glances as though trying to see her pendulant ear-ring with the purplish gem.

"Where would you like to sleep," she asked cheerfully. "Near the stove? Or maybe you'd rather sleep on the beds? I'll pull the mattress up to the stove," she decided without waiting for the answer. "It will be warmer. The room gets quite cold by the morning."

"We'll have to go out for a minute," Venka got up.

"Of course," she laughed. "The night is long and something might happen, as often does to grandfather. I'm tired of him. I hate the sight and sound of him, the old devil on the stove. Left over from the old regime, he is."

We went out on to the porch. The blizzard was still howling away on all sides, and for an instant, in that tossing darkness, I had the sensation of being on another planet.

The taiga at our feet had run wild, a raging sea of foam, but it did not seem as terrifying as when we had been crossing it. It was hard to believe that we had actually done so.

"Are we going to sleep?" I asked Venka, meaning whether we would really sleep or just pretend to be sleeping.

"We're going to sleep," Venka said.

We returned to the stupefying stuffiness of the room, which seemed pleasant after the cold wind.

"Do you know what grandfather is saying?" Our young hostess whispered. "He says you never came from Saveli's at all . . . in short, that you are spotters."

"Let him talk," Venka waved the matter aside. "I have a favour to ask of you, Klanya. If anyone knocks on the door—you can never tell who may come in this weather—don't open, but call us first."

"What if Saveli comes?"

"That's different of course."

Venka behaved as if he were an old friend of Klanya's. He noticed a set of seven alabaster elephants arranged in diminishing sizes on a laced runner over a chest of drawers.

"Who gave you those, Klanya, Klochkov?"

"Yes. How do you know?"

"Of course I know," he laughed, pleased that he had guessed right. "I know everything."

He could have guessed wrong, of course. But by guessing right he had increased our hostess' confidence in us.

She touched the biggest of the elephants tenderly:

"Yevlampi Grigoryevich gave them to me for good luck. He told me that they bring good luck."

"Yes, I know," nodded Venka.

"Baukin told me that they found these elephants in Goryunovo when they raided the co-operative. There were many good things there: all sorts of material and these elephants. Nobody paid any attention to them, but Yevlampi Grigoryevich put them into his pocket. 'These are for Klanya,' he said. 'Only a trifle, but a woman's always pleased when she is remembered.'"

"That's quite true," nodded Venka again. "Has Baukin been here lately?"

"Yes, last week. He comes often. He stayed here about ten days after he escaped from Dudari. He sawed and cut all the wood and repaired the gate."

I remembered the broken planks of Baukin's own gate and asked. "Why doesn't he live in his own house in Shumilovo? Is he afraid?"

Klanya turned her pretty, long-lashed eyes upon me with surprise.

"Who, Lazar?" She seemed offended on his account. "Lazar is afraid of nobody. He is the most desperate man I know. Only Konstantin Ivanovich, perhaps, is a little braver, and even he's not braver, just wiser. Even Yevlampi Grigoryevich, they say, was afraid of Lazar, afraid that Lazar would replace him as ataman."

Klanya came away from the chest of drawers and mounted the two steps to the stove top. She and the old man spoke to each other for some time.

Still, why wasn't Lazar Baukin living in Shumilovo? But I was afraid to ask any more questions.

Venka was silent too, examining the photographs on the walls.

The photographs showed several big-faced heavily bearded men in long frock-coats and women in huge hats and blouses with puffed sleeves. They didn't look like the ancestors of our hostess at all. There was a frowning priest, perhaps even a bishop, in his tall ecclesiastic hat. This could be no relative of Klanya's! Or perhaps he was, who could tell? Perhaps he was related to someone who belonged to the gangs. It was not likely though. Such a man would not care to display an august relative in this manner.

More likely than not, it had got here by accident. Various relics of the rich households shattered by the Revolution were still negotiable in exchange for bread on the town markets. Even old photographs had some market value, let alone fancy caskets, vases, bronze candlesticks shaped like angels, Viennese rocking chairs with plush seats, frock-coats with satin lapels, aristocratic trousers with straps at the bottoms and many other such things.

The rich peasants bartered bread for these valuables in the towns and brought them to the remotest villages and cottages in the taiga.

That was why the oddest and most unexpected articles of urban luxury and curios could turn up not only in Klanya's house, but in any home hereabouts. This was nothing to be surprised about. We were accustomed to see a gramophone side by side with an old dresser on carved legs, or a marble wash basin facing a chest of drawers to add distinction to the house.

What was surprising was the hostess. After her exchange with the old man she came over behind us as we stood looking at the portraits.

"That's old junk," she said with a wave of her hand, "old songs, but what's going to happen to us now, my dears?"

"What do you mean: what's going to happen now?"

"Well, to our lives and everything? They say that Zlotnikov has run off to Japan with his flame. He deserted his band, took a lot of gold and made off."

This was something new to us, but we showed no surprise.



"They say all sorts of things," Venka merely remarked.

"But is it true or not?" She persisted.

"I don't know." Venka shook his head.

"You don't know?" She seemed surprised. "Everybody is talking about it here!" (Who was everybody, we wondered.) "Lazar even said that they chased Zlotnikov, that is, our own men. If they had caught him they would have killed him."

We ought to have known this. Too bad we had learned it only now. But perhaps it was all nonsense?

"Did it happen long ago?" asked Venka.

"Yes, two weeks ago, I think. Lazar was sitting right there in that rocking chair, telling me about it. 'That's what we've come to,' he said. 'The atamans are running away.' Perhaps Konstantin Ivanovich is thinking of doing so too. Perhaps he will run away with Lushka? Give the Japs a chance of seeing her. They say she was playing around with the English quite a bit when she was still a girl," Klanya laughed. "So you haven't heard anything about it?"

Venka shook his head.

"They're not writing about it in the newspapers of course," she narrowed her eyes quizzically.

She must have realized that we were not who we were pretending to be and that the old man on the stove bunk was right. But Venka confused her at once, saying that we had just come from Tagulma and had not yet heard the news.

"So you've been to Tagulma?" she said in surprise. "That's right, Lazar told me."

Lazar must have told Venka about Tagulma too, but that was something she could not have known. Reassured, she spoke of Lazar again, how he had enjoyed the work of splitting and sawing the wood. 'If you only knew how I've been longing to do a bit of work around the house, Klanya,' he said. 'Even my axe is singing about it.'

I was going to ask why he didn't work on his own farm but was fore-stalled:

"His woman has driven him out of the house," she said. "He hasn't been living at home all these years. He only goes there at times by night like a wolf to bring something to the children. They can hardly remember him. He was in the army before, took part in two wars, you might say, and then joined Klochkov. His wife can't speak about that openly, of course. It might bring the authorities down on her. So she says that he's just missing and that she is something like a war widow. That's better for her. She got a horse from them last year because she is so poor. It wasn't much of a horse: half-dead and mangy all over. Still, she brushed it with tar and gave it a scrubbing with clay and did everything she could for the animal and it picked up very nicely. But then, Lazar turned up again after his escape, thinking that his wife would shed tears of joy over him. Instead, she threatened to throw the oven

irons at him, saying: 'Get out of here, you devil! They may take the horse away on account of you. What haven't I gone through alone with the children all these years, but we've at least got a horse now. The authorities gave it to me cheap.' 'What do you need the nag for?' Lazar tried to reason with her. 'I'll bring you the kind of a horse you can't take your eyes off. Not a horse, but a flying dragon!' But she stuck to her own. 'It'll be a stolen horse you'll bring me and I'll have to hide it away. But this horse is my own in the sight of all. I've got a certificate for him.' Lazar tried to talk to her this way and that and at last asked her plainly: 'Now tell me who is dearer to you: your lawful husband or a mangy gelding?' But all she did was wave the irons at him, shouting: 'Don't dishonour me in the eyes of the village!' Quite the grand lady, isn't she?" Klanya laughed. "I'm sorry for Lazar and don't care who knows it," she went on. "Konstantin Ivanovich treats him like dirt, wants him to go through some test or other after his escape. And, on the other hand, there is his lawful wife keeping him at a distance too. 'Why don't you find another woman?' I said to him last time. 'Aren't there enough women about? You're still a man in your prime and, as to your Fenichka, if you don't mind my saying so, there's nothing so fetching about her. She's as thin as a rail and getting on in years.' 'What about the children?' he asked me. He is afraid that the children will forget him when they grow up."

I was surprised to hear of such human traits in the brutish Lazar Baukin. But were these traits only human? Animals too feel for their young. It was too late that Lazar had remembered his children.

"Only Saveli respects Lazar now," she concluded, winding the clock in the lacquered case with a sweeping downward pull of the weight chain. "Look how late it is. It's time to go to bed."

Venka and I lay down on the broad wool mattress she had spread for us near the stove and covered ourselves with a sheepskin.

I should have liked to ask Venka who Saveli was, but did not dare. Whispering would sound suspicious. We lay still under the sheepskin, listening to the creaking of a bed in the next room as Klanya Zvyagina, the jealous bride of the "emperor of all of the taiga," was laying her luscious body to rest. Above us, consumed with hatred and infirmities, lay the moaning and groaning ex-police inspector who was being cared for at the orders of the mysterious Saveli in whose name we had entered this house.

The cottage stood on a hill, but in the darkness it seemed to me that we were lying at the very bottom of a pit.

Venka gently rolled from under the sheepskin and went softly to the door of the passage.

I could visualize him groping for the dipper in the barrel, dipping some water with ice and drinking in deep draughts, the drops falling on his naked chest.

I too was very thirsty. My insides were burning from the home-brew, the onions or perhaps something else that we had eaten. Still, I did not dare to get up.



I heard Venka leave the passage and enter Klanya's room. The bed creaked again: Klanya must have got up too. I remembered her words to the old man on the stove bunk: 'They have come from Saveli with important business.' Perhaps Venka was telling her about this business now.

Or perhaps he was just making love to her? Perhaps he was embracing her big, warm and fragrant body and was kissing her in the dark. Well, let Venka kiss her, rather than that bandit Vorontsov. What would become of her if she were to get herself mixed up with those bandits—she was already mixed up with them. Her beauty would be wasted.

I should have liked to tell all this to Klanya, but never would. It's not everything one can talk about to others. They would not take it from you anyway. Perhaps Venka would try. Perhaps she would believe him. Hadn't she said that he looked like Kostya Vorontsov? What a compliment indeed! To say that one looked like a bandit!

No, Venka would not be making love to Klanya, by no means. But what if he was? I strained my ears, but could hear only snatches of their talk.

"As God is my witness! . . . I swear by God. . . ." I heard her say in a loud whisper.

I heard the same words again after a pause. But what Venka said escaped me. I strained harder, even rising on my elbow until I heard Venka's unexpected words: "Well, just get this: We have never been here and you have never seen us. Understand?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Only speak quietly. That old devil up there may hear you."

Venka said something more, but I couldn't hear. I could only catch the words: "Yes, I understand," repeated by Klanya several times in the same heated whisper.

She had understood it all, but not I. It was only clear that Venka was ordering her to do something, and that very strictly.

No, he was decidedly not making love to her. I was sure of it. I could vouch for it. I wondered if perhaps I would make love to her in the dark in that room, at the edge of the world, on a different planet as I first thought.

Ashamed though I was, I had to admit to myself on that harassing night that I would if I could, especially if she led me on.

To justify my weakness, I kept thinking that I was really sorry for Klanya, perhaps because she was so young, beautiful and involved with the bandits. I would have talked her into leaving this place. I would even have married her if she would agree, of course. I would get her away from that old man on top of the stove. I would lead her away from everything. She would perish otherwise and her beauty too.

Life was bound to change everywhere. Everything would be better and life just splendid. We would have complete Socialism. But without Klanya if she went on being mixed up with the bandits. After all, she was not rotten to the core. She could be reformed. She could be taken away from here and reformed. Otherwise she would perish like all the bandits.

"Banditry has no prospects in our country. It is heading for inevitable disaster." This phrase, so beautiful as I thought then, had been written by Yakov Uzelkov in one of his articles. I remembered the phrase. I had even copied it in my notebook. I was always laughing at Uzelkov, but still I admired him as a writer. I wondered how he would have written up this night that we were passing. He would have added many details, of course. It would all read very beautifully, but. . . .

I fell asleep with the thought unfinished. But I awoke with a jolt. I had been dreaming that I was drifting down the Angara in a boat without oars until it struck a raft and a cold wave swept over the gunwale. The boat was about to turn over. There was no way out! Yes, there was a way out.

I opened my eyes. It was still dark, but the blizzard had abated. The tin lamp was burning dimly on the wall. Venka stood over me, fully dressed.

"Put your boots on and let's go."

"Won't you have some milk first?" Klanya asked in a guilty, somewhat shaky voice so unlike yesterday's. She was leaning against the door jamb, her hair done up, but without the ear-rings. She had not put them on or looked at the mirror as she had done the day before. Her eyes fell now and then with a fluttering of lashes and this made her even more beautiful—more tender.

"We could do with some milk," Venka agreed as he had done in Rasopino the day before.

We were having our milk, while Klanya sat watching us sadly at a corner of the table, her warm ruddy cheek resting on her palm. Perhaps she was sorry to be parting with us, or on the contrary was afraid of us and sorry that she had been so confiding yesterday.

She knew where we had come from. That was certain. And she was between the devil and the deep sea. She would be afraid to tell who had been her visitors this night and it would be hard for her to extricate herself from this difficulty.

Venka was the first to rise.

"Everything has gone well, considering that this is our first meeting," he said extending his hand smiling. "We thank you very much."

She shook hands with us, first with Venka and then with me. Her fingers were delicate, but surprisingly strong. Her hand clasp was pleasant to me. Venka said something more to her in the passage as I went out on the porch.

I was sorry, somehow, to be going away.

## 12

We skied down into the darkness and the frosty mist that crawled over the hollow, its brownish tentacles clutching at the broken ridge of the forest.

"We may pull off something big," said Venka when we entered the quiet cut through the forest. "We'll be fools if we don't lay hands on that sham emperor of theirs, on him and his noisy crowd."

Who was Saveli, I wanted to know?

"I don't know yet," Venka laughed. "Some important bug, but not so important at that if Lazar could get at his secrets. Klanya, as you may have noticed, at first mistook us for Vorontsov's messengers. It was Saveli who had told her that she was to expect messengers last night. He had told it also to Lazar who detained the real messengers. He knew who they were."

There were many other things I should have liked to know, but Venka grew evasive.

"Later on," he said. "There are details I don't understand myself. It's a tricky business. The main thing is not to break the thread. I've got to think it all out first."

Besides, it wasn't very convenient to talk on skis with Venka well in the lead. Still, I asked him: "Are you going to tell the chief where we were?"

"Why should we now? It's only windbags who make reports before a thing is done. Let's do what we have to do and then report."

We glided over the snow for a long time. There was only a thin layer of fresh flakes on a firm base below. Nature seemed to be resting after the blizzard. The trees were swaying leisurely now. Here and there, we were showered with ice-crusts lumps of snow. It was still cold, but there was spring in the air. It would soon come. We could even smell the berries and the bird-

cherry, moss and lichen of the previous year still clinging to the tree trunks and deceiving us with their fragrance. The snow was still deep.

"You and I have often thought that we are as ignorant as savages, but it turns out that there are savages even more ignorant and terrible than we," said Venka turning to me and cutting a wide circle with his skis. "They look like human beings, but live like bears, or even worse than bears, with no prospects at all. People won't live like that under Communism."

"And how do you think people will live under Communism?"

"How do I know? Am I a lecturer?" He shot ahead with vicious jabs at the snow with his pole ends.

We were silent for a long time.

"Do you think that Klanya Zvyagina is a sensible person?" I asked when we had settled down to a slower, but smoother pace. "Or just a giddy girl?"

"How do I know? I think she is too deeply involved now. She probably won't manage to extricate herself either!"

"It's a pity," I said.

"Of course," Venka agreed.

The fact that he agreed with me raised him in my estimation. He was a splendid fellow, I thought, following in his tracks. He is clever, quick and very brave.

"Lazar Baukin is all mixed up," he said, slowing down. "I wouldn't like to be in his shoes just now. Vorontsov wants him to go through some test or other. I don't know what. And that's what makes him desperate. He doesn't think it worth his while and can't see which way to turn."

"You've certainly shaken the man up, I must say."

"I had nothing to do with it," Venka answered almost angrily, looking back. "He's no fool. He sees how things are going. There is no escape for him. If he leaves the bandits, they'll do him in. On the other hand he hates us like poison too."

"Still, he put us on to Klanya, didn't he?"

"Not immediately. He realized that we had not come to Shumilovo by accident. But that's not the main thing. The main thing is that he doesn't want to go through with that test."

"How do you know?"

"Because!" Venka laughed. "If he had meant to go through with it, he would have done us in last night in the forest. Vorontsov would surely have accepted that as the best of tests. But he didn't, you see, and even gave us a clue, and a very good one too. That's something, isn't it?"

"Of course."

"And that's not all," said Venka darting ahead.

We reached Bolshiye Vyselki, where we were supposed to spend the previous night, sooner than we expected and pushed on through the gloomy morning.

Senior Militiaman Semyon Vorobyov, waiting for us in Prokazovo, now

justified his name.<sup>1</sup> Huddled in his cloak, he stood looking at us like an old sparrow ruffled by the wind. His new uniform did not weaken the impression.

"Your apparatus has broken down, wings and all," he declared with some sarcasm. "It has just broken to pieces and messed up the works. It busted up yesterday, in Pryakhino."

"The bandit's grape-vine works well," Venka laughed as we walked away from the militiaman. "Klanya knew what she was talking about when she said the machine had broken down. Still, the grape-vine will not save the bandits if we handle the thread properly."

We skied on to Pryakhino. Our chief was in a bad temper. He was unkempt and had evidently slept badly. He was cursing the mechanic for the nth time, probably, beside the aero-sledge which had sunk into what was perhaps eternal slumber.

The mechanic only grunted in response and tried vainly to unscrew some of the nuts with a spanner. His leather coat and helmet, which had so pleased us yesterday and suited him so well, had been flung to the bottom of the sledge. He now looked as ordinary as any local rustic in his padded vest.

"It's easy to talk!" he burst out at last, glaring defiance, "but engineering, if you want to know, is a dark forest. You should not forget that this sledge was not made in Russia. It's a captured sledge and, to the best of my judgement, is a Japanese sledge. And I'm not a Japanese, but a Russian mechanic to begin with. I'm a pure Russian; Mikulov is my name."

"Are you really?" The chief said ironically. "The Russian mechanics, let me tell you, are out to remake Russia from end to end, and here you are, tinkering without results."

"And you get rid of the bandits first!" The mechanic was shouting now. "Get rid of the bandits first and then remake Russia. But you can't, can you? I know what's going to happen. You'll get on some carts and go back to Dudari, while I am duty-bound to stay with this God-damned Japanese aero-sledge! The bandits will come here at night and cut me to pieces. And what for? Just because you wanted to ride about fancy—in a foreign contraption—and for such a distance too."

"The bandits will be doing the right thing," answered the chief laughing. "A pessimist like you is quite superfluous."

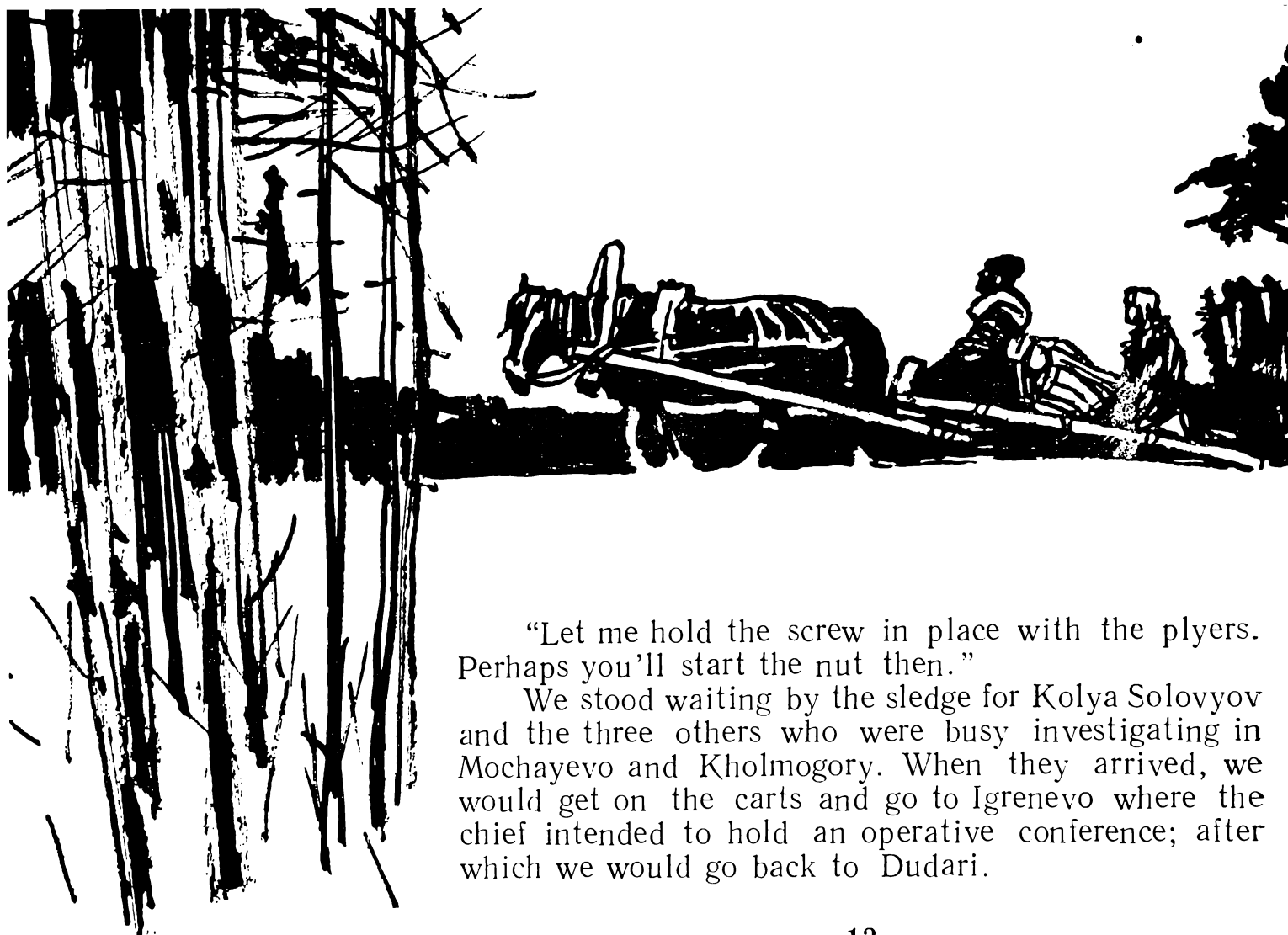
"Well, don't be afraid, don't get down-hearted about it," soothed Vorobyov who had just come on the scene. "You won't be alone, will you! I'll stay with you until they bring some horses."

"And what's the good of that?" raged the mechanic. "You've only got a Smith & Wesson pistol on you. Now, if you had a machine-gun, I would say that you were a real representative of power, something to be afraid of."

"Well, I'll stay with you anyway," Vorobyov said unoffended, and squatted at the nose of the sledge where the mechanic was still trying to loosen a nut.

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<sup>1</sup> Vorobyov—similar to Vorobei—sparrow.



"Let me hold the screw in place with the plyers. Perhaps you'll start the nut then."

We stood waiting by the sledge for Kolya Solovyov and the three others who were busy investigating in Mochayevo and Kholmogory. When they arrived, we would get on the carts and go to Igrenevo where the chief intended to hold an operative conference; after which we would go back to Dudari.

13

We had left Dudari in bitter winter, but were returning in the spring thaw. The steel runners of the sledge were now swishing over the wet snow or crunching over the bare stones. This season has always filled me not only with joy, but also with vague anxiety over various matters that should have been finished the day before or even early in the winter. Here, the spring had come and tomorrow, perhaps, there would be no snow and the swollen buds on the trees would be bursting and the earth be green. And all this, though I had left something important undone. I hadn't sent any money to my mother, hadn't read the books I should have read, hadn't had my boots mended, hadn't made good many important plans.

Actually, I had had no important plans in early youth and that made me very unhappy. It seemed to me that I was living as aimlessly as the growing grass. The people around me were doing the things they had thought out in advance and were trying their hardest to accomplish them. But what were my aims?

I hadn't done anything sensible even in Voyevodsky Forest. I hadn't tried to. I had just followed Venka as a witness, a sort of bodyguard. He could have done without a bodyguard of course.



Venka was lying next to me on the straw in a low sleigh, his head resting on the felt boots of the driver who stood on his knees at the front, shaking the reins over the back of the shaggy horse.

But the cart driver's legs must have grown numb, because he shifted to a perch on the crossbar.

"Have you something to smoke, Comrade Commissar?" he asked Venka.

"We haven't."

"That's bad," he sighed. "What sort of commissars are you if you haven't even got a pinch of tobacco?"

"What else do you think we haven't got?" Venka smiled.

"The rest is not my affair," said the cart driver. "That's not for me to say. I was told to bring you to town and that's what I'm doing. 'You take these commissars to town!' I was told. 'They've been looking for the bandits.' And others too were given the same order. If not for those orders we would be carting logs, but we've got to do as we are told. Did you find any bandits?"

"No."

"Well, they're not easy to find. They're in the forest, and even commissars are afraid to go very far into the forest. God be praised that you were spared. You could have lost your lives as easily as not. Nobody wants to die, especially if he is getting good wages and free rations. The state's free feeds taste particularly good."

The driver was obviously making fun of us. He then spoke of the ferocity of the bandits.

"So you've been on an inspection tour, Comrade Commissars?" he asked finally. "You've been inspecting the population? But I dare say you did not see Konstantin Ivanovich himself."

"No, we did not," admitted Venka. "And have you seen him, old man?"

"Now where could I have seen him?" The driver frowned. "They don't pay me to chase him."

"Don't be too envious about our wages," I broke in. "And don't hold the free feeds against us. There is more food in the villages than in town. You are even supplying. . . ."

I was about to say "bandits," but Venka grasped me by the wrist.

"Look here, old man! I'll take your name and address and send you a postcard when we catch Vorontsov so that you can come and have a look at him."

"So you hope to catch him after all?"

"Of course. Otherwise, it would not be worth your while to take us to town when you have other work. You'd be doing better to cart logs instead."

Venka talked to the carter in a cocky boyish manner, but he seemed to have aged when we reached Dudari and entered the bath-house. His bandage had stuck to his wounded shoulder so badly that we found it hard to tear it off even soaked in hot water. His shoulder was swollen and his face had turned grey. He refused to join me in the steam bath, but only washed himself

as well as he could, rinsed his bandage, tossed the towel over his shoulder and sat waiting in the dressing chamber until I finished and could bandage his shoulder.

"You'll have to take the steam for the two of us," he joked. "Sorry I can't use all that fine steam."

Finished with the bathing, we went to look for Polyakov to have Venka's shoulder properly dressed, but the medical assistant was nowhere to be found.

While looking for him, we learned that there was going to be a Comsomol meeting with an important question on the agenda.

"Let's go to the meeting. We'll find Polyakov afterwards," suggested Venka. "I would not like to miss it. It will be good to meet all the boys again."

"You should not have made the trip to Voyevodsky Forest," I said, noticing that Venka kept wincing with pain.

"Why not?" he asked indignantly. "It was a very useful trip. We've picked up some clues."

"But suppose your shoulder gets bad again? It might be quite serious!"

"That's nothing. Polyakov will set it right. It was healing well; he said so himself. And Dr. Ginsburg is here, unless he already left."

"You may have to go to hospital for a while."

"No, I won't. I'll go to Voyevodsky Forest again as soon as the thaw is over. We should not have left that place unwatched today. Someone should have stayed. That was a mistake."

"But we were ordered to leave by the chief. We're not responsible for that. There's no telling what he. . . ."

"But we are responsible for that," Venka cut in. "We're responsible for everything that happens or will happen around: We're not a couple of logs, are we?"

The words were spoken so sharply, as he closed his eyes with the pain in his shoulder, that I remember them to this day. And I shall always remember his face as he spoke them; it stood out so tensely with a deep furrow between the brows.

"Are you going to see Klanya Zvyagina if you go again?" I asked.

"Yes, I will."

"So she's hit it off with you?"

"She has."

"And what about Julia?"

"Julia?" He looked at me angrily, as if I had reproached him of something. Closing his eyes with the pain again, he said after a pause. "Julia. . . . I really don't know what to say. . . . I've never met such a girl and probably never shall. I even dream of her and think of her all the time, no matter what is happening. I just keep thinking of her, thinking that she is looking at me. No, I'll never meet another girl like that."

This was the first time he had spoken so frankly about Julia. It was hard for him to talk, probably because of the pain in his shoulder.

"How can you say such a thing?" I said somewhat embarrassed. "You've never even met her, really. What if she turns out to be different when you talk to her?"

"What of it? I don't care. I'm sure that she is cleverer than anyone we know, cleverer than I, though I don't think I'm very bright. I'm too trustful, you know. Though I may say that no one whom I've really trusted has ever deceived me."

"But what about those bandits who got away? Lazar Baukin and the others? You didn't expect them to escape, did you?"

We were passing the bare wet trees of the town park along the riverside.

The river was swollen and its ice-crust darkened. In another week, the ice would heave, burst and flow rumbling out of sight to the far-away Arctic.

Venka paused on the edge of the steep bank, peering into the distant blackness of the taiga overhung with stained clouds shot with the rays of the setting sun.

We had been out there, far away under those clouds, only this morning, in the triangle formed by the hills and the rivers where Voyevodsky Forest lies.

I thought that Venka did not feel like answering because I had touched a sore spot.

"You can't read a person's soul, can you?" I said, hoping to smooth things over. "One can't really read the thoughts of other people. That was a bad thing, that Lazar Baukin affair. You believed him and so did everybody else. And suddenly he escaped. Still, it may be justified yet. The prosecutor, at any rate, is keeping quiet."

"That's all nonsense," said Venka and waved his hand as if trying to keep something unpleasant away. "Lazar Baukin is no kinsman of mine and never promised anyone that he would not run away. The guards were careless and he got away. But we've got to learn to read people's souls on this job we're doing."

Again he was lost in thought, staring out at Voyevodsky Forest, the haunts of those whom we were yet to track down and even annihilate.

Uzelkov and a stranger, a lean young man in spectacles and a fashionable Finnish hat with a leather top and lambskin trimming, passed without noticing us.

"It's time to go to the meeting," said Venka looking at them.

And so we went on.

It was quiet and rather dark in the thick-walled rooms of the Paris Commune Club which but recently had been a convent.

We climbed the narrow stone steps to the refreshment room on the second floor.

Yakov Uzelkov and the young stranger who had removed his Finnish hat were sitting at the table drinking lemonade. The stranger's face was plump and childish despite his professorial spectacles; he had sleek dark hair and rather frail shoulders which he kept hunching together as though he were cold. A long-stemmed pipe hung from his teeth.

"This is Boris Sumskoy," Uzelkov introduced his companion. "You've probably heard of him before. These are the local Pinkertons."

On any other occasion we would have pounced on him for such an introduction, but it was awkward to quarrel with him in front of another man and especially before one like Boris Sumskoy about whom we had heard of course. He often wrote satirical essays about priests and religion and was known to be a member of the gubernia committee of the Comsomol.

"Pinkertons," he laughed gently. "This is quite a pleasure." He extended a friendly hand.

It would have been stupid to take offence, especially since Boris Sumskoy obviously did not mean to offend us in any way. It was simply that he thought Uzelkov's remark witty.

"Boris, that is Boris Arkadyevich," he nodded at Sumskoy, "is going to make a report on the 'opium' of religion. We're going to discuss the case of a certain Yegorov on Boris Arkadyevich's initiative too. Boris Arkadyevich attaches special importance to this case."

"Yes, I think it may be useful to the whole of our town's organization." Sumskoy removed his pipe. "People should be taught by concrete examples, and the case of Yegorov may serve as a good illustration."

We had no idea who Yegorov was or what he had done, but Uzelkov was not backward in explaining:

"Yegorov worked in the creamery and was even a member of the Comsomol. But instead of fighting religious superstitions, in a way, recently took part in religious ceremonies himself, to be exact, in the christening of a baby."

"So he runs with the hares and hunts with the hounds?" Venka smiled.

"Exactly," Sumskoy raised his pipe. "Striking lack of principle. It would be good too if one of you would speak on the question."

"I can't!" Venka said decisively. "Besides, I don't even know the lad. What you say his name was? Yegorov?"

Sumskoy returned the pipe to his teeth.

"That doesn't matter," he said emitting a dense, fragrant wreath of smoke.

The flavour of his probably very expensive tobacco, his new leather jacket with the black velvet collar, and his dark blue Gallifet breeches tucked into the tops of his smart felt boots and everything we had heard about him combined to overwhelm us somewhat. It was a great honour to be talking informally to this man who had come straight from the gubernia center. Still, Venka objected.

"It would be awkward if I spoke on this matter. Why pick on me?"

"But that's stupid," Uzelkov regarded us regretfully. "This is a straightforward instruction of the gubernia committee. You must speak! The uyezd committee has already expelled Yegorov from the Comsomol and Comrade Sumskoy intends to focus the attention of the organization on this odious case. That's why you must speak."

"Why don't you speak yourself?" I asked, but Uzelkov only laughed.

"You're funny. I can always speak at a meeting, but Comrade Sumskoy wants someone of the masses to take the floor."

"Exactly," Sumskoy said.

"And besides, I'm going to write it up in the paper," Uzelkov promised. "I've got it all lined up, for that matter. I was present at the meeting of the uyezd committee which expelled Yegorov from the Comsomol. This meeting, we're going to have now, will be something like a final chord in the matter."

"Exactly," Sumskoy again agreed, drawing a watch and chain from his breeches' pocket. "It's time to begin, I think."

"Yes," said Uzelkov.

We said nothing at all.

What could we have said?

And we could find nothing to say as the platform party took their places at the long table covered with a red cloth. Sumskoy, the first speaker, was unable to begin for a long time because of prolonged applause, though there were actually few people in the hall. There were no more than thirty Comsomol members in the town and an additional fifteen or twenty throughout the uyezd. Such was the total membership of our uyezd organization then, and they were present nearly in a body to hear the famous Sumskoy.

"I went to school with him," explained Uzelkov as he took his seat near us. "He was in the fifth when I was in the third form. Then I went to work at the medical supply base, while he went to the front as a member of the propaganda brigade; so we lost track of each other."

"Why do you call him Boris Arkadyevich if you're old friends?" I was surprised to hear a Comsomol member called by his name and patronymic even if he was older in years.

"I don't like to be . . . eh, malapert," said Uzelkov rising. "I'll go and get my coat. It's too chilly here."

"What does malapert mean?" I asked detaining him with a tug at his jacket.

"It's just what you are doing," said Uzelkov angrily. "Let go! I'm not a girl to hang on to." And off he went to the cloak-room for his coat, though Boris Sumskoy had begun to speak. He must have known in advance everything that Sumskoy would say.

". . . World capitalism threatens with fresh intervention. The 'White' general Pepelyayev and his defeated troops are roving near Yakutsk, not far from us. He has been employed by the American industrialists to make a raid on Soviet Yakutia so that they can buy our furs cheap. The Pope in Rome is waving his golden incense burner, praying for thunderbolts on our heads. And at this very time, there are Comsomol members in our serried ranks who cannot rid themselves of the opium of religion. They're just a step away from betraying the interests of the proletariat, and in this respect the case of the former Comsomol member Yegorov is highly instructive. It is necessary and imperative to rivet the attention of the entire organization on this matter.

Necessary and imperative to expose the horrible depths to which this man has descended!"

Boris Sumskoy spoke quietly and emphatically, like a man confident that he would not be interrupted, that all would listen to him to the end. He declared that the uyezd Comsomol bureau's action expelling Yegorov from the ranks of the Russian Young Communist League had been correct and timely. It would serve as a good example. . . .

"But what has actually happened?" shouted Vaska Tsaritsin suddenly. "First tell us what happened."

Zurikov who sat at the long table on the platform tinkled the bell, calling Tsaritsin to order.

Boris Sumskoy bent his head and ogled the audience with surprise over his professorial spectacles.

"That's no way to conduct a meeting!" Tsaritsin half rose in his seat. "If there is such a thing as a Yegorov case, then let the presidium tell the meeting just what it is all about. Instead, they give us certain ready-made conclusions. That's not right."

"I see," Sumskoy nodded. "So there are elements at this meeting who want to whitewash Yegorov. I see. But I must warn you that they will not succeed. They will not succeed, I tell you!"

"He's an outstanding polemicist," Uzelkov whispered to us. He had already retaken his place, wearing his coat. "He's formidable I tell you. Yegorov's fate is as good as sealed."

The hall grew noisier when three more Comsomol members supported Tsaritsin. Zurikov exchanged whispers with the other people on the platform and at last declared that the meeting was not being conducted according to regulations.

Zurikov then reported on the case of Yegorov himself.

"But where is Yegorov?" shouted Tsaritsin again.

"Are you here, Yegorov?" Zurikov peered into the hall.

"I'm here," answered a barely audible voice from the back rows.

"Let him come out where we can see him," suggested Tsaritsin. "Let him tell us what happened."

A tall shy youngster in a black undersized jacket, ambled to the platform.

"Why, we know him very well," Venka said. "His name is Sasha, I think, and he works at the Marat Creamery."

"That's right," I agreed. "Do you remember the time he brought a ladder and followed us on to the roof?"

We also remembered that this same Yegorov had brought us a cartridge bag dropped by the bandits when they plundered the creamery. It had happened last summer.

And now Yegorov was in trouble himself and stood blinking red-eyed before the meeting. Why were his eyes so red? Had he been crying?

"I live with my uncle," he said at the point of tears. "He's my mother's brother. It was he who offered me to come to this town when I was out of a

job. He is a very good man, but has married a second time and his wife, though young, is very backward in the religious sense."

"And so you and your uncle are tied to her apron strings?" asked Tsaritsin.

"It seems so," Yegorov agreed. "But I give my Comsomol word of honour that I did not go to church."

"And what does that mean?" Zurikov waved a paper before the meeting. "This is nothing less than a statement by the church elder that the Comsomol member, or rather former Comsomol member Yegorov took part in the christening of an infant, the daughter of his uncle, a certain E.G. Kugichev."

"That's a lie, so help me God! I was not in church! The church elder is angry with me because we conducted anti-religious agitation at the creamery on Christmas Eve. Right in front of the church we sang: 'Down with the monks and the priests!'"

"So you first took part in anti-religious agitation and then in a christening?" Tsaritsin again jumped from his seat. "And you drank home-made vodka too?"

"No, I did not," Yegorov shook his head, and then added after a pause. "I drank some berry brandy. Two glasses."

Everybody laughed.

"Now what was the berry brandy made of?" snapped the ever morose Iosif Golubchik. "Out of kerosene, I suppose?"

"No, it's also made with home-brew vodka," admitted Yegorov. "Only it's sweet because they put hackberry into it," and he hung his head, feeling that he had answered lamely.

"I'm sorry for the boy," I said to Venka. "He won't get out of this mess now. He's done for. Whatever made him admit that he had drunk that brandy? And two glasses too?"

"It's a good thing he admitted it," said Venka looking at Yegorov attentively. "He's an honest fellow. Why should he lie?"

"I couldn't help attending the ceremony at home," Yegorov stammered, trying nervously to fasten his undersized jacket as if about to leave the hall. "My uncle would have been hurt. He's given me a home, you know. And he got me that job too. He wrote to me to come. He's my mother's brother."

"That's no justification," shouted Tsaritsin and asked for the floor. Tsaritsin moved that the decision of the uyezd bureau be approved.

"We have no use for double-dealers in the Comsomol, those who run with the hares and hunt with the hounds!" Tsaritsin unwittingly repeated the very words Venka Malyshev had used in the refreshment room.

Then Iosif Golubchik spoke in the same vein, with the difference that he was more angry and at once called Yegorov a straggler and a ninny.

"He's blubbering, the renegade!"

"That's the truest thing he has said," remarked Uzelkov. "Yegorov is a renegade. That's exactly the way I would put it."

In those days, the European Socialists currying favour with the bourgeoisie were called renegades.

Yegorov awkwardly drew a wrist into his short sleeve to clutch the edge of it and wipe his face.

"I especially detest those hypocritical tears," Golubchik made a wry face. "You won't move us that way. We're fighting men, we of the Comsomol, and don't believe in tears."

Here, Venka Malyshev, raised his hand, and asked for the floor. Laying his jacket on the chair and readjusting his grey woollen tunic at the belt he quickly strode to the table, tall and broad-shouldered.

"But I do believe in tears," he shouted, glaring at Golubchik. "I too would cry if I were expelled. It's no joking matter, and no occasion for giggling and sniggering as Comrade Sumskoy seems to be doing. I am surprised that such a man should giggle now. Is there anything funny in all this?"

Uzelkov gasped.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "Venka Malyshev's taking too much upon himself! Boris Sumskoy is not Vaska Tsaritsin after all. He's a comrade of the gubernia level."

Meanwhile, Venka Malyshev went on:

"There's no *corpus delicti*, as far as I can see. If you investigate this case in a proper way. . . ."

"This is not a criminal investigation bureau," interjected Sumskoy loudly.

There were some who laughed and Venka was a little put out.

"I'm no speaker, of course," he said apologetically after a painful pause, "but I think that it is too early to speak of Yegorov as a former Comsomol member. We've got to look into this deeper. That's it, deeper! It seems suspicious to me that there are some who are ready to believe a church elder and mistrust the Comsomol Yegorov. Since when have the church elders grown so concerned about the purity of the Comsomol ranks? I won't vote for the expulsion of Comrade Yegorov, yes *Comrade* Yegorov, until I see more convincing evidence."

"Perhaps you would like to have some material evidence as well?" Sumskoy sneered.

"Yes, I need sound evidence," Venka reasserted. "And not only I, but everybody. I insist on it emphatically. I'm sure that you will all support me because a Comsomol organization should not only punish but also defend its members when they are charged with nonsense. That's what I think."

The hall was nearly dark and when a big oil lamp was lit on the platform table, the back rows seemed even darker. That was why we could not clearly see the girl who spoke after Venka. It was only by her voice that we recognized Julia Maltseva.

"I quite agree with the comrade who has just spoken," she raised her head and readjusted the comb in her luxurious hair. "I don't know the comrade's





name, but quite agree with him. He has put the problem in the correct Comsol manner."

Venka who had returned to his seat next to me unfastened his collar, suddenly feeling that the hall was too stuffy.

The lamp lit up Julia's features very clearly. We could even see the embroidered white swan heaving on her fluffy sweater.

Comsomol girls did not wear such sweaters then. Julia must have knitted it herself, I thought, watching her every movement.

Tsaritsin raised his hand and again asked for the floor.

"I may sound stupid now," he said smiling. "But after hearing the speakers, especially Malyshev, I've thought things over and realize that I was too much in a hurry before. I want to say right away that I was too hasty, comrades. I won't vote for the expulsion of Comrade Yegorov either. We should reconsider the matter and thrash it out."

Venka could have taken the credit for having turned the tide. All who followed him spoke in defence of Yegorov.

Zurikov once more exchanged whispers with the other people on the platform and declared that they had previously gone too far and that the decision should, perhaps, be reconsidered. And so it was, then and there.

Yegorov got away with a mere reprimand, but was warned not to take part in christenings and other religious rites as well as in drinking bouts and similar unseemly events.

Incoherent with joy the young man still sat before the platform red and perspiring. Venka, however, did not trouble to look at him again.

He seemed to be oblivious of everything. As far as I could see, he did not listen to the report of Boris Sumskoy which was interesting on the whole, if I remember correctly. He kept turning his head, wincing with the pain in his

shoulder, staring at a vaulted window. Julia Maltseva and her friend were sitting on the window-sill, though there were plenty of free seats in the hall.

"You'll get a crick in the neck," I warned him, and after the meeting suggested: "Let's go and talk to her."

"Why not?" he said as in a trance. "She's a girl of principle," he muttered looking at her again.

That was the highest praise that Venka could bestow on anyone. He had always liked this expression and what it stood for.

"He was an excellent old man, a man of principle," he would say of his father. "The Kolchakovites offered him ten thousand roubles in tsarist money to drive the locomotive of an armoured train. He could have bought a house, but preferred to be shot rather than obey."

When the meeting was over we moved towards the window, but were intercepted by Yegorov.

"Let the whole of my life pass away, but I'll always remember you, Comrade Malyshev. So help me God, upon my Leninist's word of honour, honest to goodness, if not for you, I don't know how this would have ended."

"Enough of that nonsense," said Venka annoyed and still looking towards the window.

Julia disappeared for a moment and turned up in the hall. She must have been looking for someone. Perhaps for us?

"But really, you've saved me!" insisted Yegorov wiping the perspiration from his face. "It was more than I expected."

Julia was quite near now, under the vaulted arch. Only the columns obstructed her view. But perhaps she was not looking for us at all. Probably not. Perhaps she was looking for Uzelkov?

"I was sure, you know, that they would just peck me to death," sighed Yegorov with extended arms, as though on the point of embracing Venka, yet hesitating. "I went cold all over when that Sumskoy began to talk of world capitalism, the Pope in Rome and then of me. I was a goner, I thought. But you butted in with a helping hand!"

"Now why should I have butted in with a helping hand?" Venka grew angry as he saw that Julia was gone. "What are you jawing about? Nobody butted in. It was simply that the comrades saw that the thing was wrong, that you had nothing to do with it! You really deserved a written reprimand, but nobody insisted because you made a clean breast of it. But if you go to the ceremony again, you'll find no one to help you."

"I won't go anywhere," continued Yegorov. "As it is, they'll pester the life out of me at the creamery."

Venka was no longer listening. He walked faster and faster along the narrow convent corridor as if trying to overtake Julia Maltseva, but I was sure that she had reached the street and was probably walking arm-in-arm with Uzelkov.

The snow around the club had been hard packed during the day, but by evening it had thawed so that the water was streaming over the pavement.

It was dark and damp outside. There was no light except for the old-fashioned hexagonal oil lamps on the cast-iron lamp-posts in front of the two storey town council, once the mansion of the merchant Makhotkin. The young people poured out of the club under the yellow light.

In the distance we could see Boris Sumskoy waving his arms as though he were conducting an orchestra.

I thought that Julia Maltseva might be somewhere near, but she was nowhere to be seen. Uzelkov was not to be seen either. That could mean only that he had really escorted her home.

We were walking over the wet, broken boards of the wooden pavement when we suddenly felt them shake beneath us. Someone was overtaking us.

Habitually on guard, we quickly turned and stepped aside, but were embarrassed to find that it was none other than Uzelkov.

"Yes, Veniamin," he said immediately. "You spoiled my work today. I had even found an epigraph for it:

*The stormy cities fume in print,  
But Russia's depths sleep through the din."*

"What's this all about?" asked Venka.

"About the same thing," Uzelkov laughed. "About that same Yegorov. A typical philistine with a Comsomol card, as Boris Sumskoy characterized him. I had already written a feature story about it and you. . . ."

"You're a philistine yourself," Venka looked down at him. "Yegorov is an honest fellow, but you are always trying to find something dirty in people. All you care to do is to write things up and curry favour."

"Perhaps you could tell me more specifically: just with whom I curry favour?" Uzelkov countered formidably while seeking his balance on a swaying board propped over the mud on two logs.

"I don't know with whom you are currying favour," said Venka safely negotiating the puddle with a leap, "but I do know that lies are as attractive to you as sweets to a fly."

"Tell me some more, please!" Uzelkov sneered, perched at the end of the board but hesitating to make the leap. Venka extended a helping hand. "Don't trouble, I can manage," said the reporter with a toss of his head. But he did accept Venka's hand finally and skipped to a little island of ice and snow.

"You are not able to judge what is true and what isn't," he went on, feeling that the ground underfoot was comparatively safe. "There's an empirical mess in your head because of your lack of education. Besides, you are tainted with Christian morality, so to speak. Have you read the thesis on anti-religious propaganda?"

"I haven't read any theses," answered Venka. "You're always fitting everyone into one thesis or another. You were trying to do the same to Yegorov. But if you really had the true conscience of a Comsomol member in addition to your education. . . ."

Uzelkov's head tossed again.

"Conscience? As for conscience as you understand it, and all sorts of truth seeking, I'll leave them to such vulgarizers as you, Comrade Malyshev. I care nothing for Christian morality. Well, this is as far as I go. I go that way." He was about to turn the corner, but I detained him, grasping his coat.

"What is Christian morality?" I asked.

"Christian morality? Don't you know?" Uzelkov halted.

"We would not ask if we knew," said Venka.

"Well, how shall I explain it to you in an easy way? Christian morality, first of all, is the intimidation of man with the threat of divine punishment. The churchmen preach that a man who steals, lies or does some other mean thing will be punished by God, that is, they inculcate the idea that man should behave nobly for fear of divine punishment. Out of constant fear. . . ."

"So if there is no God, you may safely lie and deceive?" asked Venka.

"I didn't say that," Uzelkov laughed. He took a packet of cigarettes from his pocket, tore off the edge of it and shook three cigarettes into his palm. Putting one of them in his teeth, he offered the others to us and produced a box of matches. The gust of the early spring winds blowing from three directions at the crossing, kept blowing out his matches. He grew nervous and Venka took the box from his frail awkward fingers, lit his cigarette at the first try and offered the light first to him and then to me, cunningly cupping the flame in his hands.

"Well done!" laughed Uzelkov. "There are some things that I am envious of."

"Just what?"

"The ability to light a cigarette so quickly with the flame in your hands when there is a strong wind."

"I can do that, all right," said Venka still holding the burning match.

"But keep to the point! Tell me sincerely, was Yegorov to blame or not?"

"Within certain limits."

"Within what limits? You tell us exactly! Should he have been expelled or not?"

"What difference does it make whether he should or shouldn't?" Uzelkov emitted a cloud of smoke.

"Just tell me in all fairness, Christian or un-Christian: should he have been expelled or not? Was he really so much to blame?"

Uzelkov smiled. "No, not so much—as the meeting showed."

"Then why did you write a feature story to disgrace him if he is not so much to blame?" I asked.

"That's right," Venka agreed, examining Uzelkov. "You and Boris Sumskoy wanted to ditch a good fellow and without rhyme or reason."

Uzelkov stooped to tie the lace of his shoe.

"That's what you think! Without rhyme or reason!" he said straightening. "Now if you had read the thesis on anti-religious propaganda you would

reason otherwise. For political considerations it is sometimes necessary to punish one man to teach a lesson to thousands."

"Oh!" moaned Venka tossing his cigarette into a puddle. I thought that it was a sudden spasm of pain in his shoulder.

"To the devil with him and his talk," I nodded towards Uzelkov. "Let's go on or you'll miss Polyakov."

"No, just a minute!" Venka thrust me aside. "So you, Uzelkov, believe that those who are not very much to blame should be punished solely to teach a lesson to someone or other. What sort of morality is that?"

"I'm not talking about morality now," Uzelkov was somewhat confused and began hurriedly to wind a scarf around his neck. "We're discussing more serious matters. Yegorov is not a prominent figure. In the framework of the state or even of a single gubernia you won't notice him at all. He's just a little cog after all. But by making an example of him we could teach many."

"So that's how it is?" Venka looked the little man over. "And you seem so innocent! And what if an example were to be made of you? What if you were kicked out of the Comsomol and everywhere else so that others could be taught a lesson by your example?"

"But I've never attended a christening," said Uzelkov quite flustered. "And besides. . . ." He looked down at the slush. "I've got my feet wet, I think."

"Then go home and get dry," said Venka, "or you'll catch a death of a cold and there will be no one to teach . . . all sorts of dirty tricks."

"You'd better be careful about what you say or I'll raise the question of your ideology at the next meeting."

"Who cares if you do?" Venka waved contemptuously.

We turned down an alley completely dark and had to stay close to the fence to keep from slipping into the deep mud glistening between small islands of snow and ice.

"Some theoretician!" I laughed, looking back. "I bet he develops his theories to Julia Maltseva. Didn't he tell us that he indulges in philosophy while she plays the guitar and sings songs?"

"Julia has nothing to do with it," Venka said very quietly. "There's no reason to connect her with this nonsense. As for the two of us: we're just a pair of blind kittens," he sighed slipping down a narrow ridge of snow and landing in the mud with one foot. "We can't even argue properly. I feel that Uzelkov is talking nonsense. I refuse to believe that there is a thesis according to which one should lie and punish an innocent man in order to prove something to somebody. That's impossible. I think that the man who lies is the man who is afraid of something. The bourgeoisie are lying because they are afraid that the truth is against them, and they are anxious to deceive people to their own advantage. But we can afford to tell the truth at any time. We have nothing to conceal. That's something I can see without reading any theses, but can't explain it well. He thrusts Christian morality at me, hinting that I'm some sort of a supporter of the priests, and that confuses me a bit; especially because

he talks to us like a man in charge of all Soviet power. It's as if he had special rights."

"He's only a little windbag. To the devil with him!"

"He's not a windbag," said Venka and added thoughtfully: "He's much worse if you have a closer look at him."

There was a figure walking just ahead of us, clutching at the rotten boards of the fence. We recognized Yegorov at once. He had, of course, recognized us too, but did not speak. He just walked gingerly on over a narrow ridge of ice-bound snow.

"Where are you going?" Venka sang out.

"On my way home, near the creamery."

"That's far, especially through this mud. And the worst of it is the darkness," sympathized Venka. "Why did you say that they'll pester the life out of you at the creamery?"

"That's hard to explain," answered Yegorov.

He must have been offended after all at the way we had cold-shouldered him at the club and Venka could sense something of this.

"Perhaps you had better stay over at our place tonight," he suggested. "We could spread a mattress for you and treat you to tea. It's true we have no hackberry brandy, but we have tea. And not with saccharine, but with sugar."

"No, thanks. I think I had better go home. I have to get up early in the morning," Yegorov replied tonelessly.

"You're lucky, you two," he added altogether sadly as we were about to part with him at a corner of Friedrich Engels Square.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because of all sorts of things. You have a good job, a permanent job. There's no one to worry you."

"That's putting it nicely!" Venka laughed. "No one to worry us! Perhaps you'd like to join us?"

"Why, I would not at all mind," Yegorov brightened. "You've got no one to humiliate you!"

"And who is humiliating you now?"

"Well that's a long story," Yegorov again evaded a direct answer. "I've got to go straight down that hill now." He gestured vaguely into the dark. "And it's so slippery."

"Why don't you come with us, really?" I suggested.

"Never mind, I'll manage it somehow." He turned to cross the square. "I'll manage somehow."

"I'll tell you what!" Venka called after him. "Drop in to see us when you are in the neighbourhood. We live very near: Number 16, Flame of Revolution Street. You'll drop in, won't you?"

"I will, I mean thank you," Yegorov called back through the dark.

He had to descend the hill, cross a bridge and then keep going through the forest.

As for us, we went on along Lenin Street, fitfully illuminated by sparse kerosene lamps. The streets were strung with wire-netted electric bulbs, but these were to be switched on only on the occasion of May Day when the new power plant would begin to work.

We passed the former Makhotkin shop, now Julia's shop as we called it mentally, and looked sadly at the huge, slightly rusty lock on the iron-plated door.

Ah, Julia, even at fifty and later I shall not understand what it was about you that was so moving, that attracted, thrilled and troubled us so sorely! But there must have been something about you that stirred us and tied our tongues in your presence. Even the lock on the door of your shop would suddenly make our hearts leap.

## 14

Venka could be determined and courageous, cunning and blunt, callous even if the circumstances required. There were many who knew him only as such. There were only a few who knew that he was shy and unsure of himself.

The windows were dark as we passed the dispensary. Polyakov must have gone to bed, and Venka was too shy to wake him up, though his shoulder hurt so badly that I thought he would go out of his mind.

He kept tossing on his narrow cot all night, cursing and gnashing his teeth. At times, he cried out Julia's name, plaintively, angrily or tenderly, calling her "Julia dear" and "darling."

"Was I shouting?" He would ask in a quite normal voice, opening his eyes.

"No, not at all!"

"I'm sorry! Go to sleep. We'll have to get up early, I had a bad dream."

Then he would begin his ravings again.

"Keep back!" he shouted to somebody. "I'll show you some Christian morality!" and he swore so viciously that our reputation was promptly ruined in the eyes of our God-fearing landlady.

"They must be drunk," she explained to a neighbour behind the door. "And they were such quiet boys at first, even if they did work at the criminal investigation department."

I had to rouse Polyakov shortly after one in the morning.

Still sleepy and angry, Polyakov examined Venka's shoulder and spread his hands helplessly.

"What can I do now? I'm not a surgeon. I'm only a medical assistant and this is a case of sepsis. Do you know what that means?"

"I do. Something has to be done immediately."

"Well, you can do what you like, but I wash my hands of the case." Polyakov shrugged. "Didn't I advise you to send for Ginsburg?"

"You did."

"Well Ginsburg has gone to Oshchepkovo. He'll be going home after that. As for me, I'm washing my hands of the matter. This is out of my competence."

"Do you see this, Roman Fyodorovich?" I said producing a Colt from under my pillow and laying it on the table. "If Venka dies, you'll die too, upon my Comsomol word of honour. I'll find you wherever you run, at the end of the earth!"

"That's all you're capable of," Polyakov sighed with an apprehensive glance at the weapon. "I'll go to Oshchepkovo now. Perhaps I'll find Ginsburg, though I can't vouch for it. He may have moved on."

Venka was taken to the uyezd hospital in charge of Polyakov's brother, Sergei Fyodorovich, likewise a medical assistant, equally lank, emaciated and ignorant, but different in his sense of importance.

"This is a medical institution and strangers are requested to leave," he declared the moment Venka was laid on a cot opposite the window.

I was the only stranger, but determined not to leave. I was going to wait for Ginsburg.

Venka's mind was wandering. He was apparently recalling his trip to Voyevodsky Forest, angry over something and feeling about under his blanket, perhaps for a pistol.

"Now come here, Julia! Don't be afraid," he said suddenly in a surprisingly clear voice.

I was annoyed that the chief of the hospital should be standing there hearing this.

"Have you got a thermometer," I asked, hoping that he would go away.

"We have everything, my dear young man," he answered, "but strangers are requested to leave, I repeat. We'll treat the patient according to our rules."

"No, you won't," I said firmly. "You'll wait until Ginsburg [comes." But there was no sign of Ginsburg.

The dawn broke slow and dreary and I could at last see that the window before Venka faced a cellar door bearing an old-fashioned, slightly rusty sign: "Morgue."

"I hope you'll at least take down that sign," I said to the director. "What do you need it for, anyway? Don't you know where your morgue is?"

"We do, of course, but what about the relatives. They come here to pick up the deceased every day."

"What do you mean, every day?"

"Every day, of course! What else do you expect? This is a hospital."

The thought that Venka might die in hospital had never occurred to me. I knew that he was strong and would surely survive, but I did not want him to open his eyes and see that sign which was enough to crush anyone's spirit.

I went into the yard, climbed the roof of the cellar entrance and ripped off the sign.



The director immediately telephoned our chief, shrieking and moaning into the receiver, complaining that the criminal investigation men were raising the devil and that if he, the chief, failed to come without delay, they would surely tear the institution limb from limb.

The chief turned up quickly enough, bawled me out and even threatened to arrest me. Not because I had torn off the sign, but because I hadn't informed him of Venka's condition.

The hullabaloo first raised by the director and then by our chief woke all the patients and stirred even Venka. The director had already placed an ice bag on his head.

The chief pounced upon Venka too. "What are you lying about for? Where were you before? Why did you conceal it? Don't you know that one can die of such a thing any minute."

"I hope not," said Venka softly, trying to sit up in the presence of the chief.

"Of course you may die! I used to know a man who died from the same thing. Out of sheer stupidity."

I began to wonder why I had bothered to rip off that sign.

In addition to bawling at Venka and me, the chief did the same to the director, treated him as a subordinate, examined the hospital and all the patients, found the place stuffy and dirty, ordered fresh air to be let in at once, unsealing and flinging open the window in the passage with his own hands.

It was at this juncture that Ginsburg arrived. He was a bouncing little old man with attentive dark eyes and a goatee, and did everything so quickly and confidently that I was then and there seized with the desire to become a doctor, or rather a surgeon. Who knows, perhaps I shall, some day? I thought.

Dr. Ginsburg did not ask strangers to leave the premises. He slipped Venka out of his clothes, swabbed his breast and shoulder with alcohol, tucked him in more comfortably, swaddling him in a towel to keep him in place and gave him something to drink. Before Venka could say so much as "oh", the doctor had slit his shoulder and with a bit of cotton extracted the stuff which had almost been the end of him. Our chief too was impressed. He thanked Dr. Ginsburg heartily, comparing his work with circus tricks, the highest compliment he could pay. The doctor, however, said that it was a trifling operation, that there were things far more complicated in surgery, and praised Venka for his endurance and iron constitution.

"With such a constitution you'll last a hundred years," he said.

And we felt deeply flattered, as though he had been praising us and our institution, especially when he added something about our socially useful and, come to think of it, dangerous job.

Dr. Ginsburg stayed on in Dudari for several days out of respect for Venka and left only when the process of healing had become active, as he put it. Still, he ordered Venka to stay in hospital, an order of which the chief most emphatically approved.

The whole of our department came down to see Venka, one man after the other, as well as visitors from other organizations, among them Sasha Yegorov from the creamery. As a present, he brought a bottle of cedar oil, assuring us that he had had a final show-down with his uncle and was going to live with his sister.

For some reason, Venka was sorry to part with Yegorov whom he had helped when in trouble. He refused the bottle of oil, because there was food enough, and advised him to give it to his sister, especially as she had three little children.

"You'd better write to us. We'll be wanting to know how you get on, how your sister receives you and what work you'll find."

"Not much chance of finding work," Yegorov said ruefully. "You know what unemployment there is. Still, I've decided to leave. After all, I have a sister there."

Venka was already able to walk about the yard and saw Yegorov to the gate.

"Just see how I cling to people!" He said to me. "What do I care about that boy after all? I have only seen him two or three times, but have taken to him already. I'm really sorry he's going away."

Venka returned to his room and began to strop his razor on a belt. He had fastened one end to a nail on the window-sill and held the other between his teeth.

Vaska Tsaritsin came in just then. He had been visiting Venka almost as often as I.

He brought some cedar nuts for Venka and cracked them himself, carefully collecting the shells in his palm. He had various news to tell.

"Julia Maltseva keeps asking about both of you whenever she meets me. At the rehearsal yesterday she asked about you again, but mostly about Venka."

Venka kept stropping his razor, facing the window to have more light and I could only see his cheek, enough to show that he had turned very red.

"The rot you talk!" he said to Tsaritsin without turning, but removing the belt from between his teeth.

"No, it's the truth," Tsaritsin said hotly. "In fact, I had the impression that she wanted to visit you here. Do you mind if I bring her?"

"What for?" Venka asked angrily, again seizing the belt with his teeth.

"I don't know. Do you mind?"

Venka silently tested his razor on his nails.

"But what about yourself?" I asked Tsaritsin. "You've been courting her, haven't you? You were even going to marry her, if I remember."

"What sort of a groom would I make?" Tsaritsin was embarrassed. "Especially for Julia Maltseva. She would laugh at me if she knew. Laughs at everybody. She's too educated."

"And Uzelkov?" I asked as casually as I could. "He's her chief admirer, isn't he?"

Tsaritsin laughed. "Uzelkov is just a comic relief. How can you compare Uzelkov with Venka? He's no match for Venka. He's just a mosquito compared to him." He nodded at Venka who was putting the finishing touches to his razor, pretending not to hear.

Tsaritsin stayed another minute or two and left, while Venka began to shave. Lathering his chin at the mirror, he was as silent as such an operation demands. I, too, had nothing to say, but still, I was annoyed: why wasn't he saying something about Tsaritsin's news. Weren't we friends? I waited patiently, but he just finished shaving one side and began the other. It was awkward for him to be shaving with one hand and I wondered how he could do it without stretching the skin with the fingers of his other hand as I and everybody else did. I was somewhat surprised, too, by that placid expression of his, as though nothing had happened and Tsaritsin had never been here. He grimaced several times, but only because the razor irritated him. Suddenly I hoped that he would cut himself, but he finished safely enough, carefully wiped his razor and put it back in its case.

"I'm ready now," he said, without looking at me.

"You're ready to run to the shop, I suppose. Perhaps it's still open and Julia may be there?" I insinuated.

Venka took up his shaving things and went out to wash them.

"What are you sulking about? Are you in love?" He smiled as he came back.

"With whom am I supposed to be in love?"

"Perhaps with Julia?"

"You've guessed wrong," I said blandly.

"With whom then?"

"Not with her, not in the least!" I didn't know why I was lying. Perhaps out of pride? "I was in love with her, it's true, but not now. It's another girl I'm after."

"Katya Petukhova?"

I nodded, though I had never cared for the little librarian.

"Honest to goodness?" Venka looked at me narrowly.

Thinking it over for a while, I firmly declared: "Honest to goodness!"

At that moment, I could have sworn that I was in love with Katya Petukhova and not with Julia. I even felt relieved.

Venka was still pacing the room.

On the next morning I went to the village of Pokukui where there had been murder with intent of robbery the night before. The victim was the director of the co-operative. The watchman had been trussed up by *ushivki*, thin leather straps "well-known", as we wrote in our reports, "for their great strength and reliable knots."

While I was conducting my investigation in Pokukui, word reached me that similar crimes had been committed in Pokaralye, Uyan and Yuchik at daybreak. In Uyan, in addition to the *ushivki*, they had found a "G & H"

shotgun, sawed-off to spray a large area with heavy shot, and an American Winchester known for its long range.

This was eloquent evidence indeed. To begin with, the things fell into our hands only because most of the Uyan men were hunters and put up a fight, killing three of the bandits.

This was both heartening and significant, because it meant that the inhabitants were joining the struggle against the bandits more and more actively. It was a pleasure to set it down in my report.

Another thing was that the weapons seized in Uyan were quite new. They had been manufactured recently, only last year. So the bandits were evidently still being supplied, perhaps directly, from abroad.

I made a note of this important fact too. But what interested me most were those leather straps.

It was not the bursting buds on the bushes or the warm sun, but those straps that showed that the spring had come and that our work would soon increase with a rush. The straps were the invention of the elusive Kostya Vorontsov, "the emperor of all of the taiga." He had apparently come out into the open and the murders must have been his handiwork.

I submitted my report to the chief and hurried to the hospital. It was dinner time and Venka was spooning semolina porridge with sunflower oil from an aluminium bowl.

"To hell with these groats and all," exclaimed Venka when I told him the news. He pushed the bowl away so violently that it rolled from the table. "Let the director finish it if he likes. I'm leaving the hospital today."

"But what about the chief? . . . He strictly ordered. . . ."

"He may order whatever he likes!" Venka flared up. "Let him take my place here if he wants to. I've been working on this case all autumn and winter. I'm not foolish enough to go on lying about now."

Venka peeled off his baize hospital smock which smelled of cabbage soup, medicine and something else quite breath-taking and put on his clothes which the attendant had brought from the locker and which now smelled of dampness and mice. He presented the attendant with a cigarette lighter made of an empty cartridge, took leave of the patients promising to drop in and play a game or two of draughts with them some time. Then we went to see the chief.

The chief immediately summoned Polyakov and ordered him to examine Venka's shoulder in his presence. Sceptical of Polyakov's findings, he examined the wound himself.

"Is it healing? Tell me what you think yourself. Is it getting better?"

"I feel that it's quite all right," assured Venka.

"Doesn't look that way to me," objected the chief. "You ought to stay in bed for ten days more. What do you think, Polyakov?"

Polyakov looked up sniffing the air as he always did when unsure of something and agreed with the chief.

"And who is going to nab Vorontsov, you?" Venka was getting angry.

"No, that's outside my competence!" Polyakov stepped back.

"That's just it. I've got to go to Voyevodsky Forest. Very urgently. Perhaps even today. I may be too late even now. And please, Roman Fyodorovich," he pleaded with the medical assistant, "be especially careful with the bandage today. I'll remove it in Voyevodsky Forest when the wound is completely healed."

"No, you're not going to Voyevodsky Forest," said the chief, unlocking his desk. "Neither today nor tomorrow. We'll have to run down Vorontsov without you." He took a carefully folded note from a drawer of his desk and handed it to Venka. It was an order to transfer Veniamin Stepanovich Malyshév to the Gubernia Criminal Investigation Department.

"I congratulate you," he said offering Venka his hand. "What else can I do but congratulate you?"

"That's all nonsense," Venka put the paper on the table. "Why should they have promoted me and not someone else? Why such an honour?"

"I think it's due to the liquidation of Klochkov's band. In other words: the promotion of young cadres to leading posts at the gubernia centre."

"But what have I to do with it?" Venka interjected. "Let them promote Kolya Solovyov and not me. It was he who killed Klochkov."

"I don't know," the chief laughed. "The leading comrades at the centre know better who killed whom. Besides, the important thing is what angle it got in the press."

The sentence Uzelkov had used in his article must have occurred to us simultaneously: the sentence about the Comsomol youth with the blazing eyes, the one who had performed miracles of courage.

"So they also believe in fairy-tales at the gubernia office," said Venka. "Whatever happens, I've got to go to Voyevodsky Forest straight away."

"We'll see when you recover." The chief buried the paper in his desk and assumed a severe expression.

Venka fastened the buttons of his shirt, tightened his belt and stood at attention.

"I'm perfectly well. I can even squeeze the shoulder, see?"

"The medical profession thinks differently."

"The medical profession be damned!" Venka flashed. No one but he could have afforded to say such a thing in the chief's presence. "I have work to do and want no nonsense from the medical profession!"

The chief did not call Venka to order, which could mean that he agreed.

Without further ado, Polyakov led Venka off to the dispensary to change the bandage.

Venka and I were walking home towards Flame of Revolution Street past the town park and the bushes nodding curly heads over the trellised fence.

"Perhaps we ought to drop in at Dolgushin's?" I suggested. "He moved his place to the garden yesterday, and brought his bear along too."

"To the devil with him!"

"But really, why not? If only to celebrate your recovery! They say he's got a new songster from Krasnoyarsk."

"What of it? I'm going to Voyevodsky Forest."

## 15

I also wanted to go, but the chief would not let me. Venka had to go alone. I did not notice his absence while at work, but missed him very much in the evenings. There was no reason to go to the hospital now and it was awkward to go to Dolgushin's alone.

Early one evening I dropped in at the library. Katya Petukhova was about to go home. She had removed her grey overall and was washing her hands at a squeaking washstand.

"The library is closed," she said rather curtly.

"That's all right," I said. "I'll just have a look at the books."

"You can do that tomorrow."

"But perhaps I'll be going away tomorrow. There's something I must look up today."

"Very well," she agreed.

I fiddled with the books, while she dried her hands and put on her blue jacket. Finally, she jingled her keys and stood at the open door, waiting for me to go.

We went out together and walked down the street in silence.

"Perhaps we ought to drop in at the garden?" I suggested unexpectedly to myself as we were passing the gates.

"Whatever for?"

"Just to have a walk. Is there anything so strange about that?"

"Nothing strange, but I haven't had my dinner."

"We can have dinner here, at Dolgushin's."

Katya flushed angrily and her little freckled nose seemed to have turned up even more.

"What do you take me for?"

This made me laugh.

"I take you for a good Comsomol and a friend."

"No you've got something up your sleeve. I've never been in a restaurant and think that Comsomols should not go there."

"Comsomols ought to try everything," I said authoritatively. "It's silly to think that only bourgeois and all sorts of riff-raff go to the restaurants."

"I see. You're an uncommon sort of fellow, aren't you?" Katya was smiling.

I was not sure that this was a compliment. I knew that her attitude was condescending. What else could it be from the height of all those books she must have read in that library of hers? Still, she came into the garden with

me and then to Dolgushin's, now an open-air restaurant improvised of panels and glass among the thickets.

She was most impressed by the stuffed bear at the entrance, just as it had stood in the winter premises. She was also interested in the visitors.

Katya was the first girl I had ever dared to invite to a restaurant and I was surprised at my own audacity. I bore myself confidently, read the menu to her and advised what to order from a set of meals differing only in their fanciful foreign names: "Escalope," "Rump Steaks," "Schnell klops," "Boeuf Bouilli," "Schnitzel."

"Do you come here often?" asked Katya.

"Of course," I lied.

For some reason, I wanted her to regard me as a flashy, wordly wise and even dissipated man. Let this tidy, well-read and well demeanoured girl, as they used to say in days of old, be horrified at me! Let her think me a play-boy frittering his life away. Let her criticize me!

But Katya did not. She only looked at me and I could see surprise mixed with fright in her intelligent eyes with a knowing twinkle in them.

I was hugely pleased.

When we had finished, she insisted on paying for her dinner separately. When I said that this was terribly philistine, she desisted. This expression intimidated many at that time and was often applied to things which had nothing at all to do with philistinism.

I saw her home, but did not dare to take her arm.

We saw each other every day after that—whenever I was free of work.

But there was no sign of Venka's return. He only telephoned to say that he had to stay on.

On several occasions, I invited Katya to visit me, to see how I lived, but she would not come.

"You had better come to see us on Sunday," she would say. "I'll introduce you to my mother."

But I too could not make up my mind. It seemed so philistine to meet her mother.

I was glad that Katya was so sensible and educated. She was not as beautiful as Julia Maltseva, of course. She was not even pretty, but very likable and nice. She was always asking about my work, not about the criminal cases I was handling, but about my general plans for the future.

"You're not going to work in the criminal department all your life? Or perhaps you'll stay there for good?"

"Why for good? I may find some other work later on. There are several things I'd like to try. I even thought that if I happened to be seriously disabled, I might try my hand as a librarian or at newspaper writing like Uzelkov."

"What a person to emulate!" said Katya. "He's just an ignoramus. I can't bear him."

I was genuinely surprised. It turned out that Uzelkov had read a good deal, but mostly those books that Katya considered trifling. When he had to

write a serious article he would come to the reading-room and leaf through the Brockhaus & Efron Encyclopedia.

"The encyclopedia has everything: chemistry, physics and everything one needs. It's like a university. But I saw only three books at his home: *Yvette, the Merry Bathing Girl*, *The Flame of Love*, and *The Secret of a Lovely Stranger*. He lends them to everybody."

"So you've visited him?"

"I've had to. No less than ten times I think. He is a very tardy reader."

"So it's only the tardy readers whom you visit?"

"Of course. He kept two volumes of the encyclopedia for a month. He can't do without the encyclopedia for even a day."

This was still more surprising. I had never suspected that there was a short-cut to education such as the encyclopedia.

"Come to think of it, he is a shallow sort of a fellow, that Uzelkov," I said for the sake of making conversation.

"Well, you and Malyshev are not very deep either, for that matter," answered Katya. "You've read a score of books without rhyme or reason and think you've had an education, when actually you've just got your minds in a muddle."

"We have." I had to agree with Katya. She was growing in my estimation.

I tried to meet her every evening, but was not always successful. She would be busy one day and I the other.

Once, I went to the park without her. She had been delayed by cataloguing at the library.

I was wandering through the dark alleys, enviously watching the couples on the benches. I had never dared to sit with Katya that way because I was afraid of her. Thinking of her just then, I had even a higher opinion of her than when she was with me.

I heard a laugh somewhere near and Vaska Tsaritsin emerged on the hub of the pathways with a girl on each arm.

Before I could even say hullo, he had pressed the warm hand of one of them into mine.

"This is my friend," he said.

The other girl too extended her hand and I recognized Julia Maltseva. We shook hands heartily as if we were old friends.

I was a little embarrassed at first, but was soon able to look into her dancing eyes. She was smiling.

Vaska Tsaritsin took the other girl's arm and walked towards the dance floor, while Julia and I followed.

"Why are you so gloomy," she said taking my arm. She used the intimate thou and there was nothing surprising about that: weren't we both Comsomols? But what surprised me was the tone! She seemed to resent the fact that I was gloomy.

"I don't know," I answered. "I was just in low spirits."



"Because Katya Petukhova didn't come?" asked Julia and looked into my eyes smiling. ("So she must be interested in me if she knows about Katya.")

"No," I said. "I just don't know why."

"And are you still gloomy?"

"No, not any more."

Julia seemed to be laughing inwardly. I could sense it, though I did not see her face. My eyes were on the ground. The thought that she was laughing made my heart twinge.

The band struck up a two-step. We reached the brightly illuminated platform where the fire brigade band sat in a wooden shell. The couples swept by raising little puffs of dust. I kept staring at the flying dust without seeing the dancers or the musicians. I could not even see Julia, though I felt her warm body at my side. I was in the throes of another fit of embarrassment and afraid to look at her. As luck would have it, Vaska Tsaritsin and his girl were nowhere to be seen.

"Are you fond of dancing?" Julia asked.

"No," I answered.

"Of course!" She laughed, though I could not see anything at all funny in the fact. "Let's go to the river then, shall we?"

We returned to one of the dark paths leading to the river.

Julia clung to me silently. It was chilly near the river and she was lightly clad. I took off my jacket and put it over her shoulders. This was the manliest thing I did. Otherwise, I was quite helpless.

We took a seat on a knobby tree trunk once dragged from the water but now long dry. The lights were flickering as always far away in the dark.

Those lights had been flickering before I was born and would continue to do so when I grew old, died or perhaps got killed.

Except in early childhood, I had never thought about death before. The dreary thought came to me for the first time just as I sat there next to Julia. For a moment I even forgot her presence. I felt so changed that I thought of things I had never thought of before.

A river boat whistled shrilly nearby. It was a small vessel, just docking at the pier, puffing and shaking, its coloured lights refracted on the dark water.

Suddenly I felt that it was chilly, even cold.

The air was filled with the scent of bird-cherry and smoke, but the smoke was stronger. Perhaps the taiga across the river was on fire far away.

Julia slipped my jacket off her shoulders.

"You must be cold too," she said handing it to me. "Let's share it."

The suggestion paralysed me, but she wrapped the jacket round both of us and we sat so close that I could feel her breathing.

"Venka Malyshev, perhaps, is out inspecting things now," I thought aloud. Perhaps he really was wandering about the taiga over there in Voyevodsky Forest from which the smoke came.

Julia showed no interest when I mentioned the name.

"What could he be inspecting now?" she only said.



To this, I objected that all sorts of things could happen now. Someone might have set fire to the taiga. It might be either hunters who did it by accident, or bandits who did it on purpose. I might be called away myself, even from the park. It had happened many times before.

I felt good that the conversation turned to my work. That was something I could speak about easily. Even my embarrassment was passing. Thinking of Venka again, I remarked:

"Venka would never believe that I could be sitting here with you this way."

As for myself, I was no longer surprised just then that the girl of whom we had been thinking so much was sitting next to me so closely, closer than I had ever sat even with Katya Petukhova.

I was getting bolder. I was not shy by nature. My shyness was purely accidental, like something resulting from shock perhaps. I was recovering from this shock now and growing even bolder than I should be, bold almost to the point of foolishness. It was out of sheer foolishness, therefore, that I said: "Venka would tear his hair if he knew we were together."

"Why would he do that?" Julia sat up and the jacket slipped from our shoulders.

"There's a reason," I said replacing the jacket. "He's badly in love with you."

Julia drew one side of the jacket over her and leaned against me again. I could see that she was interested at last. I should have liked frankly to tell her why we had bought all those matches and how we had lain awake night after night thinking of her.

Instead, I don't know why, I repeated with great feeling: "He's badly in love with you."

"And what about you?"

"About me?"

"Are you badly in love with me too?" she whispered looking at me Gypsy-like.

"Well, that depends. . . ."

"If you're not sure then better say nothing," said Julia placing her warm little hand on my wrist. "You'd better tell me something about your work."

I was not quite sure what I could safely tell or what would interest her and would have preferred to say nothing, afraid to snap the warm bond that had sprung up between us when she had asked whether or not I was in love with her. Whatever had made me say those stupid words? "That depends. . . ."

The words had cooled her at once. I had noticed it straight away, but did not know how to mend the situation and restore her former mood. But then, I felt that I could not have answered her question any other way.

"It's not so simple, you know," I ventured.

"What's not so simple?"

"Well, everything."

"You're a queer chap," she said nestling to me. "A very queer chap. You're thinking of something, but afraid to speak up. Am I right?"

"I'm not thinking of anything."

"Of nothing at all?"

"No."

"That's strange," she smiled. "I'm always thinking about something."

"Then you tell me what you're thinking about now?"

"If you like," she laughed. "I'm thinking of what you could be thinking of me: 'Such a brazen girl. She has met me for the first time and sits here with me under this jacket like an old sweetheart, asking me if I'm in love with her.' Well, tell me frankly have I guessed right?"

"Not a bit!" I protested. "It never occurred to me. . . ."

"This is not the first time we've met," she said as though in self-justification. "I should have liked to meet you last winter, you and Malyshev. I'd rather be friends with men than with girls. But you two are never to be seen anywhere. Are you so busy with your work?"

"Yes, we are."

"Your work must be interesting! Tell me something about it."

"I really don't know what to tell."

"Anything you like." She laid her slightly chilled little hand on my wrist as if to feel my pulse. "Is it true that Malyshev is the bravest of all?"

"Well, that depends." I repeated the idiotic phrase again. "We have no use for cowards in general. If a man is a coward, he'll find nothing to do in our line."

"Yes, but they say that Malyshev has more courage than anyone else."

"Who said so?"

"Well, many people," she said evasively, readjusting something at her neck. "I think so too. Such a man must be brave. I liked the way he spoke at that meeting when they were discussing what's his name, Yegorov. Malyshev was far above all the other speakers. I even dreamed about him that night."

I wanted to say that Malyshev too had dreamed and even raved about her, but held my tongue. And a good thing too. I vaguely felt that I had talked too much and that she was trying to draw me on, gently but insistently.

Why should she have wanted to know whether or not I was in love with her if she was so interested in Venka? She had heard how he had been wounded at Zolotaya Pad.

She must have read Uzelkov's description of the affair.

"Uzelkov is not around today," I said after a long pause. "I have heard that he has been giving you special attention."

"I don't know," she said sadly and rose from the tree trunk, lazily doing up her luxurious hair.

I saw her home to Number 6, Kuznechnaya Street, and got back quite late, stirred by a medley of feelings: confusion, disappointment and heart-ache.

Julia, so pretty and unpredictable in all things, threw me off balance for a long time after our brief meeting at the riverside. It was as though she had held my heart in her hands and then let it go.

Meeting Katya was rather tame after that evening, though I was not really in love with Julia either, at least not as earnestly and hungrily in love as Venka.

## 16

Venka returned from Voyevodsky Forest very dusty, lean and in high spirits. He told us nothing of his affairs, merely saying that there was a chance to rope in Vorontsov, that we would be fools if we did not take the "emperor of all of the taiga" and his entire suite.

It seemed to me that he was exaggerating.

Only the day before the chief had said at the secret operative conference that it would be fatal to underestimate the gravity of the current situation. The spring and the summer would be even harder because, according to intelligence data, the bands, far from diminishing, had indeed increased and notably in Voyevodsky Forest.

Vorontsov was still enjoying the loyal support of the rich peasants in the taiga villages. The chief urged that this factor should not be overlooked and showed us some typed leaflets found in some villages where they had been distributed by Vorontsov's messengers.

The leaflets made much of Lord Curzon's ultimatum to our government and declared that Bolshevik power would soon be a thing of the past.

According to the local priests, the icons of the Virgin Mary in the churches of Kitayevo and Zhogov, two large villages, had become wondrously lustrous overnight. This, they claimed, was a sign from above indicating an impending change of power.

"Let's not pretend that we can beard the lion in his den," said the chief at the conference. "I've had special instructions: not to go to extremes. We've

got to give careful consideration to the matter and weigh all the facts. And what does that imply? It implies that we should keep cool, level-headed and stop thinking that we could wipe out Vorontsov and his band with no effort at all."

These words were still in my mind and I was sure that the chief would be annoyed with Venka's presumption. I told him about the secret conference, but he was not impressed and even laughed.

"I'm not after Lord Curzon just now, only Vorontsov, and we would be fools to miss the chance; then it would, indeed, be better for the peasants to cart logs than give us a helping hand." The words of the old driver who had brought us from Voyevodsky Forest must have stuck in his memory.

But contrary to my expectations, the chief received Venka very mildly, had a long talk with him, after which it grew clear that Venka was to go back to Voyevodsky Forest on the next day.

"You'd better have a rest today and a good sleep," the chief advised as he escorted Venka out of his office and up the corridor, as though he was not his subordinate, but a guest. "Have a good sleep, that's the main thing. You'll make your preparations tomorrow and go the day after. That will be the best plan."

Noticing me in the passage, Venka winked as though to say: "See how nice the chief is being to me?"

But Venka did not go to bed in spite of the chief's advice though it was late evening.

"Let's go to Dolgushin's," he suggested.

"I wouldn't mind."

We met Uzelkov on our way to the gardens. He wanted to know where Venka had been and asked about the news in the criminal world. That was one of his favourite expressions. Venka replied that there was no news at all so far.

"The secret of Polichinelle?" Uzelkov laughed.

"Does Polichinelle also come from the encyclopedia?" I asked.

"What's the encyclopedia got to do with it?"

"I've heard you've read all the volumes to tatters and that they're going to sue you."

I had meant to take a dig at Uzelkov, of course, but had not anticipated the effect which this produced. Still, I was not sorry and added: "Now we know where all your fine words come from. And to think that we took you for a university graduate!"

Uzelkov was utterly crushed. His attempt to look cocky was pitiful and I was sorry for him.

"No offence meant, of course. Come to Dolgushin's with us."

"No thanks, not me," sighed Uzelkov, managing a smile after all. "I had better go back to my encyclopedia," he said and went on his way.

Entering Dolgushin's pavilion, we sat about for an hour eating steaks, drinking beer and talking of all sorts of things. But no, not about all sorts of things.

Venka told me about the big pikes to be caught in Puzyryovo Lake. He had gone there for a dip twice, though the water was very cold. The inhabitants bathed regularly there and he did the same.

One might think he had gone to Voyevodsky Forest, just to see those pikes and bathe in the lake.

Not a word would he say about the bandits, as if there were none at all. I did not press him for information. If he could have told me something, he would have. If he could not, there was no point in asking. Some secrets must be kept even between friends.

I was not offended with Venka for not telling me about his adventures in Voyevodsky Forest.

After supper we went out and saw Tsaritsin near the ice-cream vendor's cart. He was licking a raspberry ice and grimacing with the cold.

"Julia just now asked me where you were," he said smiling. "She went towards the river. You can still catch her."

"What for?" I said with dignity.

But when Tsaritsin had finished his ice-cream and gone across the way to get a drink of water, we spontaneously darted off towards the bank of the river. Two girls were sitting on the nobby, marooned tree trunk where I had sat with Julia some days before. The long grass-covered pathway terminated there. The girls looked back, startled, as we approached.

I said hullo and, taking Venka by the hand, introduced him to Julia and Katya, just as Tsaritsin had introduced me.

"We've already met," said Katya turning her eyes upon Venka. "We were at that commission together inspecting the leather factory, remember?"

Venka nodded.

As always done under such circumstances, Katya and I walked ahead pretending to lose the others.

I did not see Venka again until I reached home. He seemed upset. I thought that he was disappointed with Julia or had got the impression that she was different from what she seemed, but then, pulling his shirt off over his head, he glumly remarked:

"I would marry that girl, by God! If she consented, of course. I'd marry her straight off."

"Then why don't you?" I smiled without surprise, and then for some reason added: "I think she likes you."

Venka said nothing, but folded his clothes with especial care and went to bed. I too was not in the mood for talking. I felt rather badly after the meeting with Katya, guilty in a way. I should have told her that I had sat on the river bank with Julia that evening. I had never guessed that they were friends.

Nor had I told anything to Venka about it, though I ought to have, for what sort of friends were we otherwise?

But Venka must have fallen asleep already. I got up from my chair at the table, pushed it gently back and tip-toed to my bed.

I was under the covers and reaching to put out the lamp when I happened to glance at Venka once again. His eyes were open and he was looking at me. I was quite startled.

"No, I'm not worthy of her," he said hoisting himself on the pillow without noticing my expression.

"Why not?"

"Because," Venka sighed, "she's so delicate, just like a little girl, and there have been circumstances in my life. . . ."

"What circumstances?"

"I told you. Don't you remember?"

"What did you tell me?"

"Don't you remember?"

"No."

"Well, about how I met a woman before I was seventeen and then fell ill."

"But you were cured, weren't you?"

"What if I was? The fact is that it happened. Could I tell that to Julia?"

"I really don't know." I was puzzled. "It's rather awkward."

"That's just it. It's awkward."

"Why should you tell her at all?"

"How can I conceal such a thing if she is so sincere and agrees to marry me. If she does agree, that is."

"You can tell her after you're married."

"No, that would be deceiving her. We ought to start clean. What sort of a life would we have together if we began with lies?"

Venka looked at me, as if trying to guess what was in my mind and added: "Am I not right? What do you think?"

"Well yes, on the whole."

"And in this particular case."

"I don't know yet."

"Why don't you speak plainly," Venka reproached me. "I think there should be no secrets in family life. Work is one thing and family life is another. Everything should be above board or else there's no family life at all."

"That's true in a way. But still, it would be awkward to tell a girl such a thing."

"That's just it," Venka repeated.

He lay back, thinking. I was thinking too. What should I do? Should I tell him about that evening I had spent with her now or later on. If I told him about it now, he would be upset. And if afterwards? Or perhaps I should not say anything about it at all? What was so unusual about it after all? We had only been sitting together. I had already told him the bald fact, without mentioning the jacket. Well, it was time to tell him about the jacket too.

But Venka was the first to speak:

"I'll tell you," he said turning to me. "Here's what I always think about. I'd like to be free for three months, quite free, without caring about thieves

or bandits or anything of the sort. That would give me a chance to think over my life. About how I lived and how I'm going to live in the future. I would remember all my mistakes and shortcomings and would turn a new leaf without making any more mistakes. It would be quite different then. Otherwise things can turn out badly: there will be complete Communism, there will be new people who started life as young pioneers and never tasted red wine, let alone home-brew vodka, and they will tell us. . . ."

But just what they would tell us Venka did not yet know. He fell silent oddly, as he often did, and turned to the wall.

He lay still for a long time.

"But I can't tell her about it," he said finally. "I'd be ashamed to."

"Of course," I agreed, half asleep. The whole thing seemed absurd to me at that moment. He had met the girl for the first time that day and here he was ready to marry her and even tell her his secret.

But what's so surprising about that? I thought sleepily. He's been in love with her long enough and she too, very likely. If he's decided to marry her, it just shows that he's serious about it.

Venka was busy the next day and we saw little of each other. When I came home in the evening he was asleep. At dawn, our chief's driver took him to Voyevodsky Forest.

From time to time he would return from Voyevodsky Forest, stay for a day at most and go back.

Still, he did manage to see Julia now and then. Whenever that happened, he would come home in a thoughtful mood and, after talking to me about trifles, go to bed because he had to be up early in the morning for his next trip to the taiga.

He would never say anything about his activities in Voyevodsky Forest. Only one evening, when we were having tea, he suddenly laughed for no reason that I could see. I looked up surprised.

"It's funny that Lazar Baukin, such a brute as you call him, lets his wife beat him over the head with a poker. He even complained to me about it. 'I can't do anything with her. She's thrown me out!'"

"What I can't understand is why you got so interested in Lazar Baukin. He caught your attention last winter, remember?"

"That's right."

"But why?"

"I don't know myself," Venka laughed. "Just be patient. You'll see how things will turn out in the end. Lazar is no angel, of course."

"No angel? Why, he's a bandit! We've had plenty of his sort before. But for some reason you were all agog over him."

"There are things one can't explain," said Venka after some thought. "You can't say just why, what for and how? But once I got interested in him, I had to press the matter to the end."

Venka was concentrating all his energy on one thing: the capture of Vorontsov. He was even building his personal plans on the contemplated



event: "I'll join the Workers' Faculty when we catch him. You'll join too, won't you? We're no worse than others. When we noose the 'emperor' I'll talk things over with Julia. I can't put it off any longer."

And it was not only his personal hopes that he was staking on this: "It will be grand when we catch him. We'll finish off the rest of them too. Vorontsov has been something of a rallying point for them. Everybody is afraid of him. Even the chairmen of the village soviets. That's a downright disgrace. They call themselves representatives of Soviet power and are afraid of a bandit. They shiver when they hear his name and it's our fault. We've been fumbling over him for a long time. If we had been working properly we would have laid him by the heels last autumn. We're to blame more than anyone."

## 17

"Well, now it's begun," Venka said one day when he returned from Voyevodsky Forest. "I've told the chief all about it. He and I are going to set out tomorrow to catch the 'emperor.'"

"And what about me?"

"You?"

"Do you expect me to stay here again?"

"No, why? We'll take you too. The chief told me to take you along. We'll have Kolya Solovyov too. Only that crazy Iosif Golubchik will stay behind. I insisted on it. This is a delicate matter and we want none of his heroics."

Venka and I went to the river for a swim. Undressing on a raft of logs, he showed me the scar on his shoulder.

"Just see how well it has healed. And do you know what helped most of all? Red bilberry leaf. Lazar put it on for me. He learned it from some quack doctor in Voyevodsky Forest. It's the best medicine."

"So you see Lazar quite often?"

"Of course. We went fishing together on Chyorny Omut. He's a wonder at frying fish on a prong. He takes a fish, cleans it, puts some salt over it and holds it over the fire on a prong. It's so tasty, you can't have enough of it. And the roe has to be eaten at once with bread."

If I hadn't known who Lazar was, I would have thought Venka was talking about an old pal. But I could not forget that Lazar was a bandit with a long list of crimes to his account, crimes for which he would have to pay. He was not just a fisherman on Chyorny Omut or Puzyryovo Lake, but an outlaw in hiding. We had not set him free at the station. He had escaped and taken two other outlaws with him.

Venka, for some reason or other, never spoke of the other two who had escaped or of those survivors of Klochkov's gang who had not escaped and were serving various sentences.

He talked only about Lazar. He meant to use him for the capture of Vorontsov, of course. That was clear. There was nothing surprising about it.

Any means were justifiable, but what I could not understand was why he had taken to Lazar so. For the life of me, I could not see anything remarkable about the man except for the peculiar brutishness and frenzy seething in his small bear-like eyes.

"No offence meant, Venka, but I'm fed up with hearing of Lazar Baukin. The man revolts me."

"And do you know why?"

"No I don't, but I do know that he's repulsive."

"And do you know why? I'll tell you!" said Venka perched on the edge of the raft with his legs in the water. "He swore at you, I don't remember just how, but I know that he cursed you in the charge room. And he called our chief a swine. The chief is not likely to forget it either."

"But he wounded you," I reminded him. "And yet . . . I hope you don't mind my saying so, but you're behaving like a pious monk: offering the other cheek. I'm rather surprised at you, disgusted even."

"Disgusted with what?"

"Well, the whole thing is unnatural, as if you were really a monk. I know that you're nothing of the sort and even get very angry at times. But your attitude to Lazar is strange, to say the least. If he had put a bullet through my shoulder, I wouldn't let him get away with it."

"What would you do?"

"I don't know, but he wouldn't get away with it."

"You're talking rot," Venka drew his legs out of the water and began to walk along a slimy rolling log with his arms outstretched for balance. "You'd do nothing of the kind. And then, how do you know that it was his bullet that hit me?"

"He said so himself, even bragged about it."

"So he did," Venka leapt on to a stouter and steadier log. "He did say so, but who can tell whether he really did? He remembered my hat, but he wasn't the only one shooting. We were all shooting. It's simply that he wanted to show that he was not afraid of us when we were questioning him in the charge room. The 'White' officers stuffed his head with stories about the cruelty of the commissars, and he was sure that we would do him in at once. He thought that he had nothing to lose and wanted to die like a man. We didn't give him the chance. He turned on us with hatred, but we behaved like human beings and confused him. In that condition, I was able to study him like the palm of my hand. I saw at once that he was a sensible man, but muddle-headed. 'Just wait!' I thought. 'We'll be doing big things together yet, you and I.' And what made me think so? Because I saw that he was no coward and a man of character and a poor man too. He gained nothing by the bandit operations, but would not give in. 'Well,' I thought, 'if it's just your pride as a bandit that prevents you from giving in, there is some character in you after all, and it will be worthwhile to spend some time with you.' And that's just what I did."

"But still, he escaped."

"So he did! But see what happened afterwards! Vorontsov insisted on putting him through a test. Lazar would have done anything he was told to do and very quickly too, but not this time. Do you think he was afraid? No, he simply saw no point in the test. It's not for nothing that he told me yesterday on Chyorny Omut: 'It was smart of the commissars to introduce a uniform tax. The peasants are pleased. Even my Fenichka, goose that she is, is pleased.' Do you see what he is driving at? While preparing the test, Saveli has presented him with a pair of boots and keeps a tight hold on him. But actually, he's laughing at Saveli up his sleeve. Now it's our turn to put him through a test."

"Who is Saveli?"

"Saveli Bokov, Vorontsov's right hand. He's a peculiarly vicious brute."

"Perhaps you'll bring him round to joining Soviet power too?" I laughed. "He's also a man of character."

"You chatter like a washer-woman. I'm talking seriously and you sit there gassing, just like a washer-woman."

He stopped at the edge of the raft and looked out over the river at a white and blue tug plodding up-stream with two barges piled high with sacks and barrels. The broad red fans of the tug's paddles slapped away at the surface raising wave after wave which set us rocking as they folded away under our raft moored to the bank by steel hawsers.

"You think it's all very simple, don't you?" Venka resumed. "My mother is an intelligent woman, understands everything and is a good dressmaker too, but believes in God and goes to church regularly. Only the other day Lazar told me: 'I don't mind all the rest very much, but it's too bad that you Communists don't recognize the priests. The priests did not invent themselves, did they?' 'Can't you live without the priests?' I asked him. 'That's not the point,' he said, 'but there was something like order before and now everything is upset.' It was not for profit that Lazar fought in the ranks of the White Army and joined the bandits. He did not gain anything by it. Still, they hammered it into his head that he was fighting the Communists for a Holy Russia and that God would excuse everything, even pillage and murder. There's a priest in Vorontsov's band until now, Father Nikodim Preobrazhensky. He's also muddling their heads with the notion that Soviet power has not been sent by God . . . Soviet power is only getting under way just like that tug out there. It's working hard, because it has to pull against the stream. And look at those waves."

Venka put his hands together preparing for a dive, leaped into the air as though from a spring-board and parted the water. I did the same and we lay floating on our backs, rocking with the tipple. The water was too cold and I had to get out, but Venka continued to swim in various styles: crawl, duck fashion and overarm, flinging his muscular arms forward.

He came out of the water, blue, his teeth chattering, and lay flat on the raft, covering only his head with a shirt to keep off the sun. I was rinsing my faded jersey in the current.

"You were surprised that I was not angry when Lazar said that he had meant to kill me," said Venka taking the shirt from his face. "And so you say I'm pretending to be a pious monk, but that's nonsense." Venka rolled over on his stomach. "I was angry as the devil during the fighting at Zolotaya Pad. It was I who killed Pokatilov. I'm sure of it and I'm not sorry. That was a fight, wasn't it! But now look: here am I doing the questioning and there is the prisoner in front of me. He is quite alone. There's no one to stand behind him, while I have the law and the full power of the state behind me—with cannons, machine-guns and all. Why should I be enraged with the prisoner now? The State is not enraged, is it? Lenin says. . . ." The log on which he lay suddenly dipped under him, splashing the two of us with cold spray. Tsaritsin had sprung on to the raft from the steep bank.

"Are you delivering a lecture?" he laughed.

Venka reddened and did not tell what Lenin had said.

Tsaritsin extended his broad, oil-stained hand. His face and neck were also smeared.

"I've just come from work," he said merrily and began to throw off his clothes, sitting on the slanting rudder log. "You've had a swim already?"

"Yes," I answered, annoyed that he had interrupted us. There were many things I should have liked to ask Venka. He was in one of those good moods when I could ask him anything. I had always been sure that he knew more than he talked about. But it wasn't very often that he cared to talk, and even then he spoke in an abrupt, incoherent manner, as if considering what he was going to say and trying to define rather to himself than to his companion what troubled him most.

Tsaritsin, apparently, had not noticed that he had interrupted our conversation. Rid of his clothes, he lay flat on the log nearest to the bank, sank both arms into the water to scoop up handfuls of sand with which to rub the oil off his face and body, humming all the while.

"I heard a good lecture yesterday," he said. "It seems that there will be no militia."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say," he declared triumphantly. He was so besmeared with sand and slime that even his hair stood on end. "They're going to put an end to it all, both to the militia and the criminal investigation department. They're not going to try anyone any more."

"Who says so?"

"What do you mean who? The lecturer of course. I don't know where he came from. From Chita perhaps? He spoke at the power station yesterday and will speak again at the Paris Commune Club."

"What does he say?"

"Lots of things. But I've heard him say with my own ears that there will be no more criminal investigation departments, nor even prosecutors."

We're supposed to be going on an operation tomorrow and now there is news like that, thought I.

"He's a windbag," said Venka basking in the sun. "It's all nonsense."

"But I tell you it isn't!" insisted Tsaritsin skipping on one foot down the same slimy rolling log that Venka had walked before. "The lecturer quoted a book of Lenin. I forgot the name of it. I've jotted it down somewhere."

"And who is going to catch the bandits?" I asked Vaska. "You and your lecturer?"

"There'll be no bandits." Tsaritsin lost his balance and fell into the water. "It's Gospel truth!" he shouted coming to the surface, puffing. "Ask anybody who was there! I also asked people afterwards, to make sure. They're going to abolish everything."

We were lying on the raft staring at Vaska who gave us rapid demonstrations of a floating drowned pig, of a timid, shame-faced lady bathing and of a drowned man taking his final plunge to the bottom. He was a born actor and forgot all about the news he had brought.

We were not very troubled by his news, of course. We understood that he must have mixed things up somewhere. We told him as much when he came out of the water.

"No, I've got it straight," he insisted, dancing on one foot to shake the water out of his ear. "There'll be no prisons either. The lecturer said so quite definitely."

"But when?" Venka asked rising from the logs. "Tomorrow?"

"Not tomorrow, but under Communism," explained Tsaritsin.

Venka washed his feet and began to dress with the care which always pleased me about him. He wrapped his feet in cloths and drew on his boots.

"It's quite right. I too have read that there'll be no authorities under Communism," he said fastening his belt. "Everything will depend on people's conscience."

Feeling for my jersey spread on the logs, I found it quite dry and began to dress too, while Venka brushed his hair, dipping his comb in the water.

"So I was telling the truth, you see," said Tsaritsin joyfully.

"Yes, on the whole. But you should have told us that it'll happen only under Communism. The lecturer must have said so too."

"He did of course," admitted Tsaritsin. "He was talking about how we'll live under Communism, about all sorts of new cities and factories and everything under Communism."

That Communism would come soon, was something no one doubted.

Neither we, Vaska Tsaritsin, nor perhaps even the visiting lecturer could imagine what hardships and suffering lay in store for our people before the lights of Communism could flicker on the horizon.

Tsaritsin stayed to bathe, while Venka and I climbed the steep bank to cross the little space formerly called Merchants' Park and now Fighters for the Revolution Park. Many things had been renamed in this little uyezd town: public buildings, streets and gardens. Yet most of the people lived as they had lived before. They lived warily, glancing cautiously about them, worried by vague rumours, forebodings or by sudden bursts of shooting in the night.

We were newcomers here and had neither relatives nor friends in the town. Nor were we anxious to strike up fresh acquaintances for fear of finding ourselves among the alien-minded.

Power had changed hands three times in a short period. The Reds had gone and the Whites had come, but then the Reds had returned again. Each power, naturally, had had its own supporters in this tiny town of log houses washed by the gloomy ocean of the taiga, as a poet would have put it.

Those who had sided with the vanquished had either to leave or bide their time in hope of change. Nor did the victors feel that they were complete masters of the situation, because the town's economy, its trade and industry were bossed by the new representatives of private enterprise, the Nepmen, as they were called. They owned many shops, big and small, purchasing offices and even small factories: the saw-mill, the tannery and the cloak factory.

Still, we were convinced that Communism must soon come. This in spite of the fact that opposite the Fighters for the Revolution Park, from which we emerged, on the market square a two-storey house had already been renovated and the house painters were thudding barefooted over the freshly painted roof as they raised a huge sign into place on the second floor: "I. K. Dolgushin, Confectionary."

"Just see what fine glass he has managed to get," Venka exclaimed, pointing to the shining windows golden in the last rays of the sun. "And they say you can't get glass anywhere."

Dolgushin has set himself up in the town like a conqueror. It was going to be difficult to oust him again. No easier perhaps than to capture and disarm Vorontsov; and Vorontsov was not yet caught and it was far from certain that he ever would be.

The edge of the sky darkened as we walked across the market square.

"It's going to rain," I said, looking up.

"Not very soon," said Venka, "but it's time it did. It's been so hot!" He paused before a kvass barrel on a cart. "Will you have a drink too?"

"No, I'd rather have tea at home."

"As you like," Venka handed a coin to the vendor and held a heavy mug under the tap. Then, he bought two triangular slices of birdcherry pie, offered one to me and bit deeply into his own.

"But Tsaritsin doesn't know anything yet about the money."

"What money?"

"Well, there'll be no money either under Communism. I've read it somewhere. We'll be able to get everything without money. Everything will be handed out free."

That was news to me. I had never read any such thing and I tried my best to imagine what the market would look like without money.

It was always that way. Thoughts about what was near and distant, about the past and the future ran through our minds simultaneously. We thought with greater emotion and more often of the future than of the present.

An organ grinder with a wooden leg resembling a mallet stood by the closed door of a barn. His organ rested on another wooden leg, similar to his own, and was fastened to him with a belt. A fluffy tailed squirrel sat beside a box of tickets on the organ which was covered with gilded tin and coloured glass beads. The little animal held a green cedar cone between its foreclaws, but instead of nibbling at it, kept darting its head from side to side, as though looking for someone who needed his fortune told.

We should have been glad to pay a good deal to have our fortunes told, to know what our lives would be like in ten, twenty or thirty years, but we were too enlightened to believe in fortunes told by a squirrel.

We just stopped by the barn, eating our slices of the pie and looking on.

A young woman loosened a knot in her handkerchief with her teeth, took out a coin and handed it to the organ grinder. The squirrel then put the cedar cone aside and began to rummage among the tickets like a faithful book-keeper. Its paws finally clawed up a blue ticket, which the organ grinder took and read to the woman.

"Beware of the dark eye. The dark eye is pursuing you."

"A man's eye or a woman's?" she asked.

"What?"

"I mean what sort of an eye is pursuing me? The eye of a man or a woman?"

"How do I know?" he shrugged. "If you like, you can buy another ticket. Perhaps the squirrel will clear it up."

The woman again untied her handkerchief and bought another ticket.

"Men are perfidious. Don't seek happiness in marriage."

"Why do you scare people?" asked Venka smiling. "Couldn't you invent something more cheerful?"

"Please move on, citizen!" The organ grinder said severely. "I'm not trying to scare anybody. People are scared enough as it is."

The organ grinder readjusted his strap and began to turn the handle of his instrument, singing in an angry piercing voice as though menacing the whole of mankind:

*If die I must for my love of thee  
I'll welcome such a penalty  
And leave this vale with an only sigh:  
"Together we loved, together we'll die!"*

It seemed to me that the song, the voice, the jarring accompaniment of the organ had brought the lowering skies even lower over the market.

"What nonsense!" said Venka.

I felt that he was referring to something that had just occurred to him and not to the singer. He was looking at his watch. "Are you going home?"

"Yes, aren't you?"

"I have to see someone."

"Julia?" I asked bluntly.

He nodded and smiled shame-facedly.

I went to bed earlier than usual that evening, soon after ten o'clock, after opening our one and only window as wide as I could, because the room was unbearably stuffy. The overcast sky made the dark even blacker. There was going to be a storm.

I was awakened by a rustling noise. Venka was climbing into the room through the window as stealthily as a cat.

"A fine detective you are!" he laughed. "You've opened the window and fallen asleep. Anybody could have climbed in and even dragged you off by the feet like a cooked hare."

"It's so stuffy," I complained. "I have a headache."

"I don't feel very well either," Venka said gloomily. He lit the lamp and sat down at the table supporting his cheek as though he had a toothache.

"I have no courage. That's what's the matter with me," he said after a pause. "I haven't the nerve to tell her."

"To tell her what?"

"You've forgotten already?" Venka said wryly. "Don't you remember what we were talking about last time?"

"Ah, yes," I said, too sleepy to give any advice.

But he was waiting for my answer.

"I'm going to write a letter to her," he said finally.

"No, you shouldn't do that."

"But what should I do?"

"Perhaps you'll tell her afterwards?"

"Afterwards? The summer will be over before you know it."

"Perhaps you should say nothing at all for the time being," I suggested uncertainly.

"To deceive her, you mean?" Venka was indignant.

"No, I suppose that's not the way!" I agreed struggling with sleep but dozing off in the sultriness preceding the storm.

I had a terrifying dream. A huge shaggy dog was chasing me and I was only a little three-year-old child in a nightgown. I was running as fast as I could, but even in my sleep I thought: the dog is man's best friend. Grandma used to say it's a good omen. The dog caught me by the neck and I screamed.

"Excuse me!" Venka was prodding my shoulder. "I wanted to read you the letter I wrote. I'd like to know what you think of it." He stood before me in a pair of violently purple shorts and read the letter he had just penned. The snatches of it that penetrated my sleepy consciousness ran something like this: "and since I've made a clean breast of it, you ought to make allowances" or "I do not want you to reproach me for deceit afterwards."

I still remember the last words:

"I would like our lives to be as clear as water so that we should understand each other at once and never quarrel as others whom we see about us every day."



"Please think it over—carefully and well. If you feel that it is too awkward to talk to me directly, write a letter or a note as I am so anxiously doing in this stuffy room, just before the storm.

"I would like to clasp your beautiful hand and look into your deep honest eyes.

"I promise to love you always as your honest friend.

"With Comsomol greetings.

Veniamin Malyshev."

"What do you think of it?" he asked.

"It's all right," I said.

"Then let's go to bed." He sighed as though rid of a heavy burden. "I'll make a clean copy of it in the morning."

There was a crackling and rumbling in the sky as though something had suddenly broken. Then came a blinding flash and big generous refreshing drops drubbed on the tin roof, on the frame and panes of the open window.

When the rain ceased, it turned out to be morning and there was no more time for sleep.

Nor was there any time to rewrite the letter. Venka put it in an envelope and jotted down the address: Julia Maltseva, Number 6 Kuznechnaya Street.

"I must post it immediately," he said licking the stamp. "I had better send it off before I change my mind." After a pause he added. "I hate people who change their minds. I don't like to do it myself. One must do what one has to do."

He seemed to be boosting his courage.

We went out into the street freshened by the recent rain and fragrant with wet leaves and damp earth.

Venka crossed to the other pavement, he posted his letter and stood looking at the mail box, smiling sadly.

## 18

The rain fell only over Dudari, but the highway was as sultry as it had been the day before and all summer. There were the same stifling clouds of yellow dust.

We were riding along at a trot on the horses taken from the militia reserve. There were six of us, including the chief.

Not many of us, thought I looking about again at my companions on the road. Not enough to bag Kostya Vorontsov who, though not an emperor, was a bandit of no small calibre. Couldn't they have at least let us have the trainees from the military school?

I was riding a rusty mare with a white spot between her eyes. My neighbour Kolya Solovyov had chosen a dappled foal, while Venka and the chief were following on bays. Venka was arguing with the chief, but then overtook us looking rather morose; the chief had disagreed with him at the last moment and had ordered Iosif Golubchik to join the party too.



"We've taken that lunatic along again," said Venka. "I've been slaving all spring and nearly all summer, getting things straight, and then they take this nut along to spoil it all. And why? Because of his heroism!"

"Let the chief keep an eye on him if he likes," Kolya Solovyov scowled. "We can't be responsible for that bird."

"We'll have to be whether we like it or not," said Venka.

I expected him to repeat his favourite argument that we were responsible for everything that surrounded us. Instead, he drew abreast of Golubchik who cut a dashing figure in his Cossack saddle on a lean bay. I could see that Venka was trying to reason with him, but Golubchik only laughed, winding the handle strap of his riding crop around his wrist. I saw Venka lose colour as he turned to look at the chief. That meant that he was angry.

"To hell with Golubchik!" I would have liked to shout to Venka. "Let him ride on. Let the chief face the music afterwards."

I was sorry for Venka and very angry with the chief. Couldn't he see that the whole thing could fall through because of his fancy to take that half-baked schoolboy along?

We ran into trouble twice on account of him: in the winter when Klochkov was surrounded in Zolotaya Pad and during operations on Zhuzhelikha where he also opened fire ahead of the others to show his eagerness.

I overtook Venka when he fell behind Golubchik.

"There is another way out," I said. "If the chief is stubborn about it, you can be too. You can tell him that your shoulder is bad again or give some other excuse to show that it's impossible for you to take part in the operation. Let



the chief and his pet Golubchik catch Vorontsov by themselves. I'd like to see them do it!" I laughed. But Venka grew even gloomier.

"I'd never have expected you to give such foolish advice!" he said gravely. "Am I doing this for the chief's pleasure? Not on your life!" And spurring his mare, he darted to the side of the chief to argue again.

The chief's expression was severe, almost majestic, the expression which always accompanied his favourite words: "If my memory has not failed me, it seems to me that I am still the chief here so far."

I could have sworn that he was saying just that. But Venka continued to insist, tightening the reins so that his horse's head was thrown unnaturally back.

I strained to hear what they were saying and at last caught the chief's words: "Well, do as you like, but remember. . . ."

Just what he was to remember I could not catch. Venka came to my side again. "The chief has ordered that you, Kolya Solovyov and I should turn off at Devichi Dvor. Let's get ahead of the others!"

Venka had brightened visibly. It was obvious that the chief's order had not been given on his own initiative, but as a result of Venka's arguing.

We turned from the highway towards Devichi Dvor and rode into a dense forest of massive trees. Here we could advance only in single file over a narrow path that played hide and seek with us amid the bushes, twisting and turning back upon itself. The air was as humid as in an old-fashioned Siberian bath-house where old gaffers come to steam their bones. We grew sweaty at once. Swarms of midges stuck to our hands and faces, crawling into our mouths and even down our throats. I kept coughing and spitting.

"Do you remember this place?" Venka asked cheerfully.

"Of course!" I answered not so cheerfully, because I did not remember anything and besides was too busy even to think properly at the moment.

"We were here in the winter, remember?"

I jerked my head to express agreement and avoid the midges clinging to my neck and shoulders and creeping into my very gullet as it seemed to me.

"Don't you remember?" Venka was impatient.

"I do." It was hell, I thought.

Even imperturbable Kolya Solovyov said: "Wish I had taken a mosquito net! I meant to, but forgot. What a nuisance the little bastards are! They're eating the eyes out of my head."

In some places we rode nearly in darkness when the tall tree tops eclipsed the sun.

The dry, fallen twigs snapped under the hoofs of our horses. But the midges would not leave us even in the gloaming.

"We passed here in the winter, only a little farther to the left," Venka recollected.

I could not remember a thing.

"There's a river nearby," he said as though this would make us feel better. Weren't the midges bothering him at all?! Or perhaps he didn't notice them, carried away as he was by this operation which he had been planning so long. "What a pity we can't stop for a swim! There's no time. We've got to move on!"

We emerged on a splendid sun-lit clearing, but not for long. Venka led us into the dense timber again; and again we were riding in single file.

"It's swampy here!" Venka indicated the clearing with his riding crop. "Remember I told you how I once nearly went down in the mud right here?"

Sure enough, a narrow river soon appeared and it grew cooler.

We were riding along the bank, looking at the swift blue stream foaming where it fell over the jagged rocks.

The air was filled with the fragrance of currants or rather of currant leaf and birch bark baked in the sun.

The birches merrily reared their slender trunks through the rippling green, as if overjoyed to have escaped into the sun from the gloom of the taiga where they had been choked by firs, pines and a wilderness of thickets.

Venka sprang from his saddle and sat down on a mossy stump to throw off his boots and trousers. He then took his mare by the rein and stroking her neck led her cautiously across the noisy but shallow stream. Kolya Solovyov and I did the same. We splashed about a bit in the cold water and then rode on along the edge of the taiga.

Graceful cedars rustled solemnly overhead.

"What a lot of cones!" said Kolya Solovyov, speaking for the first time and sighing. "If we could come here just for the fun of it and gather cones. I'm very fond of that."

"That's a good idea. We'll do it some day! We'll get rid of all the bandits and come here. This is a nice place. One could build a rest-home here—no worse than the one that was built on Lake Baikal last year."

"But what about the midges?" I spat on my palm and swabbed my neck which smarted as if from a burn. "What are you going to do about the midges?"

"Midges don't matter!" said Venka as he spat on his palm. (So they were bothering him too.) "It's easier to get rid of midges than of bandits."

"In one of the magazines it said that there is a good remedy against midges," Kolya Solovyov broke in with unusual volubility. "A kind of powder. But it must be sprinkled over the woods from aeroplanes."

"That's stupid," I said. "We'll have to build our own aeroplanes first."

"Why not?" asked Venka. "We'll build lots of them—more than we'll know what to do with!"

His boyish bravado cheered us and we hardly noticed that he was leading us into the stuffiest part of the taiga, places swarming with midges and big buzzing flies whose sting raised large blisters on our bodies, made the horses snort, jerk back their heads and swish their tails. I kept wetting my palm to nurse my neck and face until my mouth was dry of saliva.

We kept moving on, the twigs crackling and slapping our faces in the dark. If a man wasn't careful they could rip his mouth or tear out his eyes.

I bent low over the neck of my snorting animal, my face down. I could feel the branches brush my head, shoulders and legs, but kept my eyelids shut until the sharp daylight touched my face.

We were in another large clearing at the foot of slopes clothed with tall, rustling cedars. Here we came upon a flock of handsome, pigeon-like birds. I would in fact have taken them for pigeons if not for their small size and erratic flight. They soared over the cedars or dipped into the darkest shades.

"Damned those birds!" Kolya Solovyov exclaimed. "The little bounders! Just see what they're doing!" Reining his grey foal, he brandished his whip at the birds. "See what they're doing! They're cedar birds!"

Venka dismounted.

"So they are. They'll peck all the cedar cones to bits."

"No they won't! That's just the trouble!" Kolya Solovyov objected. "They only peck at the tops of the cones and knock them down. What's the good of them after that? The little devils!"

Kolya Solovyov was so upset that one could think the cedars were his personal property, that this was his own orchard the birds were attacking.

Venka nodded sympathetically.

I dismounted to stretch my legs, and felt sorry too for the cedar cones, though it was not at all likely we would ever come here to gather the nuts.

"If I could only rig up a long stick to reach those cones," said Kolya Solovyov looking upwards longingly. "Many of them are ripe. Perhaps I could climb one of the trees. What about it Veniamin? It will only take a minute. I'll bring down a dozen or two, enough to last us on our way."

"There's no time," said Venka uncertainly.

"But perhaps I should! It'll only take a minute."

"There's no time," repeated Venka more firmly, setting his foot in the stirrup.

We moved on through broad alleys in the timber, our path knobbly with the twisted roots of the trees, and talked about the cedar cones and the marauding birds.

Kolya Solovyov was recollecting interesting episodes from his hunter's life. Venka and I also had our memories. Kolya Solovyov said that there would be many squirrels this season because of the abundant cedar nuts. There would also be silver foxes because they too were fond of cedar nuts.

"Who isn't?" smiled Venka. "Lazar says that they even cure consumption."

"Lazar?" Kolya Solovyov even reined his restive horse.

"Lazar Baukin."

Venka bent forward and readjusted the cloth under his saddle. He seemed embarrassed. Kolya Solovyov did not know that he had been in contact with Lazar Baukin and that we had met him in winter. We hadn't told it to anyone, though Venka had perhaps told it to the chief.

"He must be wandering about somewhere in these parts," said Kolya.

"He lives in this section, if I remember right."

"Yes, he does," said Venka. "He knows every tree here and can find his way blindfolded."

"Of course! He has to be clever at it," Kolya smiled. "He got away from us quickly enough then, leaving no trace. If I could only meet him again!"

"You will. Perhaps even today!" Venka laughed, but grew serious at once and looked around cautiously. "Though it's more likely we'll meet him tomorrow."

Kolya said nothing, but fumbled with his reins, thinking.

"So you mean that he's working with us now?" he asked finally.

"Why should he be?" said Venka evasively. "He can do very nicely by himself. He has a head on his shoulders and is a 'conscious' man."

The word "conscious" was in vogue at that time. It was bestowed on a person like something of a prize. A "conscious" man meant a man conscious of the difficulties entailed by the building of the new world and ready to make sacrifices to overcome them.

I, and probably Kolya too, thought that the term was far too generous for a man who had belonged to Klochkov's band so recently. Still, we knew better than to object. Venka was not only a friend and a fellow Comsomol, but our chief too in a sense. This had to be kept in mind, especially now, when we were out on an operation. He must have known something about Lazar Baukin which we did not and were not supposed to know.

Venka must have understood that we did not agree with him.

"You'll see Lazar at work tomorrow," he said, once more turning his bay into the thick of the forest.

"Do you think we'll nail Vorontsov?" asked Kolya who never seemed surprised about anything.

"Probably," Venka conceded with a shade of hesitation, moving a large branch aside and urging his horse along a barely perceptible path.

Dusk was falling when we came out of the forest and entered a village.

"Do you recognize this place at least?" Venka asked. "This is the village of Dymok. We passed it on the aero-sledge, remember?"

"Certainly," I said, though I remembered nothing. It had been winter then and everything had been covered with snow. Now it was summer and the village too smelt of hot dust like the road and not only of hot dust, but also of manure, smoke and fresh milk.

We rode through the village at a walk, looking at the dark cottages. Not a light was to be seen. They were all asleep and even the dogs were silent.

"I wonder if the chief has got here already?" Venka thought aloud. "I've slipped up somewhere."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, I've miscalculated a bit," Venka sighed. "We've made a detour, but have met no one. We'll have to ride on."

This frightened me. How could we go on? That was more than even the horses could stand.

When the village lay almost behind us, we caught sight of a chink of light, behind a curtained window.

Venka dismounted and led his horse forward by the reins. We did the same, feeling that we had arrived after all.

We found our chief sitting in a large cool room, a samovar puffing before him like a steam engine. He was examining a map by the light of the lamp overhead. He carried that map about with him everywhere, examining it with the expression he might have worn at the sight of live bandits or when taking aim at them.

Iosif Golubchik, senior militiaman Semyon Vorobyov and Petya Bodayagin, or Frisky, stood or sat near.

"Hah!" barked the chief when he saw us. "We've got here well ahead of you!"

"So you did!" Venka shrugged his shoulders guiltily. He stepped close to the chief and began to talk in undertones, explaining some mistake he had made.

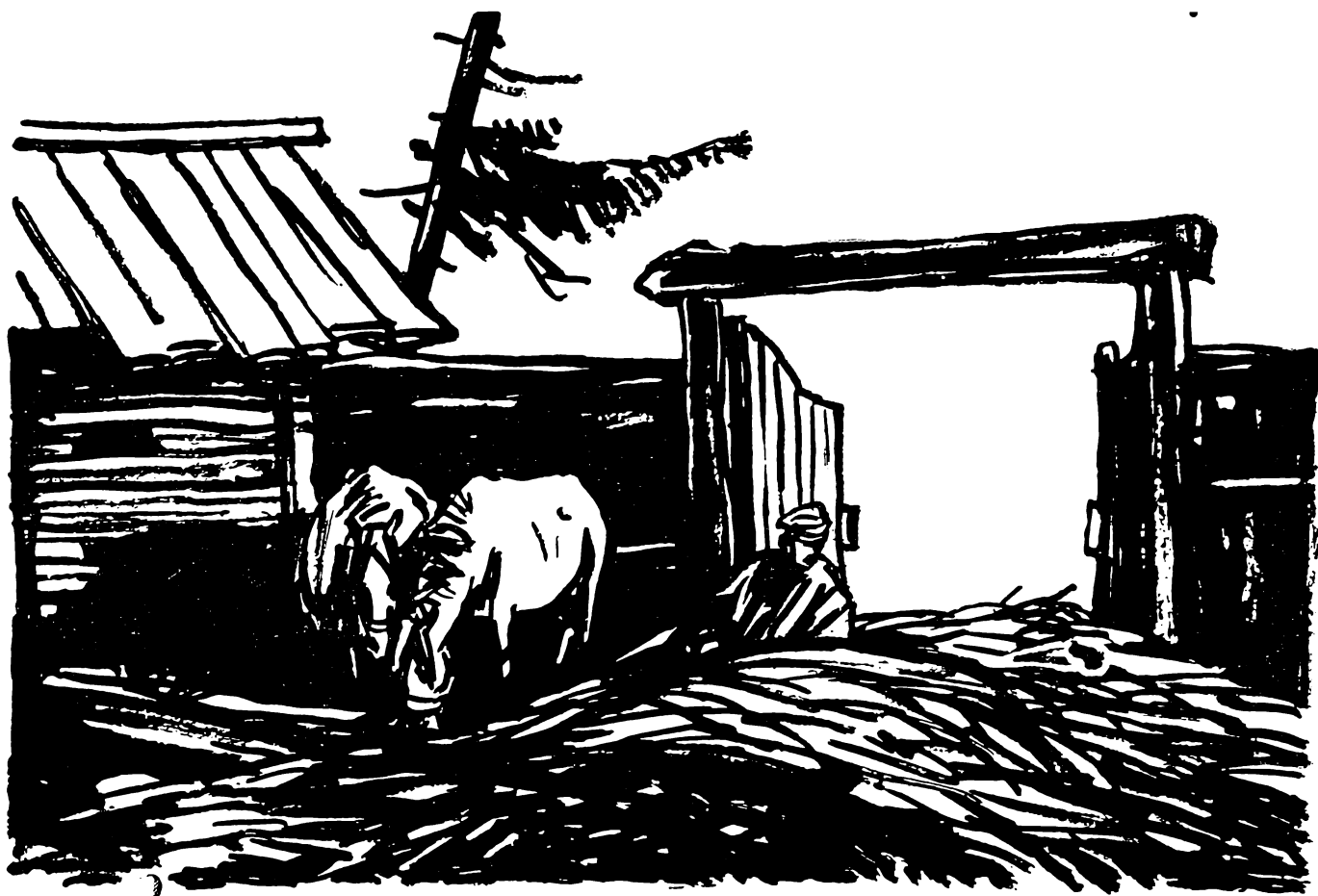
Still, the chief was in a good and even cheerful frame of mind and not in the least annoyed.

"Sit down and have tea," he invited heartily.

On the table I saw plates of pickled fish, bear ham and baked potatoes. We sat down at once and fell to. We hadn't eaten anything since morning. But instead of eating, Venka, who was as hungry as we, took Vorobyov aside:

"May I have your horse for a short time?" he asked. "Mine is too tired. You take care of my mare while I'm away. See that she gets enough fodder."

"You're welcome," said Vorobyov, smiling and curling his luxurious



moustache. "But don't forget, comrade, that my mare bites. She doesn't like strangers."

"Never mind," said Venka. "She'll like me perhaps."

Without another word to the chief, he vanished in the darkness of the taiga. The last we heard of him was the crunching of the gravel under his horse's hoofs.

The chief continued to examine the map for a while, then looked at the clock and yawned.

"There's time enough," he said to Vorobyov. "I think I'll have a nap. I'm no youngster after all. Post the sentries so that no one disturbs us. Understand?"

"Yes. It will be done." Vorobyov assured respectfully.

"Wake me if I sleep too long."

"Of course!" Vorobyov agreed again. He was older than the chief, but did not intend to sleep. "Don't worry, I'll be on guard!" he said.

Venka was gone for a long time. Having nothing better to do, Kolya Solovyov and I went out to watch our horses feeding on a mixture of chaff and flour. The stuff had been mixed in three troughs hewn out of heavy larch trunks. Two horses stood at each trough, wearily shifting from hoof to hoof, their tails lazily swishing.

There was a blob of white against the stack of straw near the horses. It was Golubchik who had laid down to follow the chief's example. Frisky lay near him and seemed immobile at last.



Looking at them for a moment, we decided to have a sleep too, and, sinking to the straw dozed off at once.

I was awakened by quiet voices nearby.

"Did she bite you?" Vorobyov was asking solicitously, the spark of his cigarette glimmering in the dark.

"No, why should she?"

I recognized Venka's voice. So he was back at last.

"I suppose she feels that you belong," said Vorobyov. I could hear him slap the animal's haunches. "She bit the public education representative last winter."

"Who?"

"Well, a man came here from the public education department of Dudari. His name was Mikhail Semyonovich Kush. She knocked his spectacles off and bit him in the chest. Strange that she did not try to bite you! If horses respect you, it can only mean that you belong. It's a good sign, a very good sign."

Venka laughed. "But she respects you too, Comrade Vorobyov."

"She's obliged to. I'm her immediate superior," said Vorobyov with dignity and began to walk the mare round the yard to prevent her from overheating after her fast run. "Did you ride far?"

"No, only a little way."

"Don't tell me that. Look how wet she is and how her sides are heaving. You've got to care for a horse like a child if you want it to be ready when you need it."

The talk was so quiet and matter of fact, that one would not have thought an important operation was pending.

Venka approached his own mare and slapped her as affectionately as Vorobyov his.

"Is the chief in?"

"Yes, but he's resting," said Vorobyov, respectfully.

"There's no time to rest," said Venka. "We've got to start straight away. We could come a long way while the weather is still cool."

"Won't you have tea?"

"There's no time." Venka made for the door, but stopped at the porch. "Haven't you got a piece of bread on you?" he pleaded with Vorobyov like an orphaned child. "I feel so empty."

"Of course!" Vorobyov came into motion. "I'll find some meat too, and everything there is. You can't fight on an empty stomach." He tethered his mare and went into the house.

In about five minutes, Venka reappeared on the porch, a shaft of light shining on a slice of bread and meat in his hands.

"You can't come with us, Semyon Mikhailovich. Your horse must rest," he said with his mouth full. "You'll join us at about noon near Puzyryovo Lake."

"Why can't I come along now? Don't worry about my Tigress!"

"What tigress?"

"That's what I call my horse, 'Tigress.'"

Venka laughed as if this were the funniest thing he had ever heard.

## 19

It was early morning when we approached Puzyryovo Lake. The newly awakened forest was filled with the twittering of birds. The moist freshness that had accumulated overnight in the leaves and moss had spread over the earth at sunrise, renewing everything alive, animating all that was immobile and filling the soul with happy anticipation.

People are kinder in the morning—yes kinder, bigger hearted and more generous. It is difficult to change to a grim frame of mind when everything joyfully acclaims the rising sun.

But we were going into action, as they say.

According to the plan of operation marked on the map by our chief, we were to bottle up the highroad, as he put it, to plant an ambush on one of the chief roads used by the "emperor of all of the taiga" when visiting his sweetheart Klanya Zvyagina.

I recalled that Klanya's house stood on the crest of a hill in Bezymyanaya Zaimka near the lake. I would never have found the place again, but felt that it was awkward to ask whether it was far or near.

Kolya Solovyov and I were riding through the woods together. He knew even less about the operation than I. The chief and his party were advancing on the other side of the highroad, out of sight and earshot.

The stillness was deep except for an industrious woodpecker earning his livelihood somewhere in the heart of the forest.

Any sensible man, it seemed to me, would have thought it too dangerous to bottle up a highway with only six men to oppose no one knew how many. One could be sure that Vorontsov had not gone to see his bride unescorted. That was most unlikely. What if he ambushed us?

The thought would have troubled me if it could have penetrated my mind at that time. But I was still groggy with sleep and my only concern was to keep awake in the saddle.

This was no easy matter. I hadn't slept for two nights. On the night before the operation, I had been unable to sleep because of the sultry air and because Venka had disturbed me with that letter of his. Neither he nor I had had really got to sleep.

With eyes half closed I watched Kolya riding at my side, or dropping slightly behind. It seemed to me that he was dozing too. What if we fell asleep in this dangerous spot? But my eyelids were leaden and gradually closed.

Suddenly Kolya prodded me in the shoulder with his riding crop.

"A bear!"

"Where?"

"I don't see him now," said Kolya quietly. "Here today and gone tomorrow!"

I closed my eyes, but was again prodded awake.

"Just look at those trees!"

I looked, but saw nothing strange about them.

"The bark has been stripped off. The bears did that! This is their mating season. But, come to think of it, it should be over."

He was right. The bark had been lacerated on several trees.

I knew that bears were dangerous in their mating season, clawing the earth, rearing on their hind legs and ripping the bark from the trees with their forepaws. I leaned over and felt the stout trunk of the aspen-tree where the green-brownish bark had been torn into long shreds. It was obvious that this had been done only a short time ago, no more than an hour or even ten minutes before: the sap was still moist. The bear could not be far. Perhaps he was watching us somewhere nearby.

It is idle talk to say that bears are more stupid than foxes, that they are clumsy and lazy. The bear is a nimble and cunning animal when he wants to be. He could overtake us even on horse-back in this forest, that is, if he wanted to.

Besides, we were not allowed to shoot. Venka had conveyed this strictest order of the chief when we were still in the village: "Fire should by no means be opened without the words of command." This was like a riddle for a child: what should one do if attacked by a bear when one has been forbidden to shoot?

I was not at all sleepy now.

I heard a crackling in the underbrush. A heavy body was plunging towards us. Kolya Solovyov stopped his horse and raised the carbine that had been strapped behind his back. I felt for the pineapple hand-grenade at my belt and remembered the instructions: "hand-grenades are not to be thrown for short distances unless one is provided with shelter." Still I decided to throw it if. . . .

A horse's muzzle foaming at the bit was thrust out of the bush. Slightly above it, over the leaves, we caught sight of Venka Malyshev's head with his cap on backwards.

"How are things?" he asked.

"We nearly took a shot at you!" Kolya laughed.

"What for?"

"We thought you were a bear."

Venka, too, thought this funny.

"I don't think there are any bears here."

"Is that so? Then what do you think of this?" Kolya pointed to the aspen.

Venka brought his horse against the tree and touched the bark as I had done.

The silence was shattered by a furious roar.

Venka glanced back and blanched. My hands and feet shook as a chill ran down my spine.

"It's a bear," Kolya said.

I could not say a thing. Nor could Venka.

Later, it seemed to me that I had not been frightened by the roar of the bear as much as by the expression on Venka's face. If Venka could be frightened, it must have been something horrible indeed.

My lazy brown mare stirred uneasily beneath me. I felt him quivering with the whole of his damp, shaggy hide.

"I'm sure it's a bear. What else could it be?" argued Kolya.

"Yes," Venka said with unusual softness; and then he added as if telling a secret: "This is the second time I've heard them roaring. It's the most terrible thing in the world, I think."

"It's because he's got a whiff of man," Kolya said brightly. "Of man and also of horse flesh. Of damp, lathery horse flesh."

The bear roared again. It was a long-drawn, ferocious and somewhat hoarse roar. Then again and again.

There was more than one bear. Perhaps two or three. Perhaps they were fighting over a female somewhere in a clearing.

Even as a child I had heard that bears fought fiercely in their mating season. They must have been fighting now too. We would be in a bad way if we stumbled upon them.

I imagined the horrible scene of an attack by bears.

All my life I have been frightened more by imaginary than by actual dangers. I have always envied the people who are completely or partly devoid of imagination. They live far more tranquilly. Their hearts do not wear out so quickly. They are the ones who most frequently receive prizes for self-possession and level-headedness in danger. Many troubles pass them by. But on the other hand, they are strangers to many joys born of the imagination, things that can both terrify and thrill.

Meanwhile, the roaring was growing angrier and louder. I had the impression that we were heading straight for the bears.

Within a minute or two we would emerge on the sun-warmed flower spangled clearing where giant blows were being struck near a cool, murmuring spring. The den of a she-bear must have been secluded under some fallen mossy tree in the neighbourhood—the sovereign couch of an unperturbed beauty not even very flattered to see the mightiest of the taiga embroiled to the death for her favour.

With my hand on the grenade, I visualized the duel of the bears, though I had never seen such a thing. The surface of the grenade grew damp with my sweat and I could even smell the metal.

I could hear Venka's voice some distance ahead:

"Remember the chief's order: 'Don't fire under any circumstances.' We've got to take the emperor alive. We have no right to kill him."

"Has he the right to kill us?" asked Kolya laughing.

Venka had no time to answer and Kolya forgot what he had asked, limpsing something in the grass.

"Why, look here. Those are bear's droppings. Right there on the ychnis."

"Don't shout," scolded Venka. "What droppings?"

"Bear's, I said!" Kolya cheerfully pointed to the spot. "His stomach's upset. He's been eating berries."

Kolya didn't seem to be afraid, I thought. He was even shouting and laughing, but for some reason I was afraid. Perhaps I hadn't had enough sleep? But the others hadn't slept either.

"I wouldn't say his stomach was quite so upset," said Venka looking down. "If you banged him over the tail with a stick, he would be sick all right! He's sensitive in the backside. The main thing is not to run away from him! Not to show fear."

I could not help envying Venka. I could see that he too was frightened by the roaring, but he was not only able to fight down his fright, but even trying to hearten us. That was why he was talking commonplaces: everyone knows that a bear's stomach gets upset when he is frightened.

"That's a law of nature. For every fear there's a greater fear," announced Venka.

"Have we far to go?" asked Kolya.

"No," said Venka. "When we reach the Yellow Spring, we'll catch sight of the hamlet. Do you recognize this place?" he added turning to me.

"Yes," I said, though not recognizing a thing.

## 20

I thought that my strength was at an end when we were approaching the Yellow Spring. I was exhausted by the heat, by the jolting in the saddle and even more by my overstrained imagination—by the fight with the bears which never took place.

The Yellow Spring bubbled cheerfully from the foot of a hill, the thin stream was not yellow, as one might have supposed, but white with foam and very cold. Only the sandy bed was yellow.

I scooped up some water and took a small gulp. The cold made my teeth ache. I washed my face and should have liked to remove my shirt to wash my back and chest, but I was not sure there was enough time for that.

I was all in, but the work was just beginning, the matter which had brought us from Dudari and kept us on the go for two days.

Our chief came out of the woods, followed by Iosif Golubchik, Frisky and Senior Militiaman Vorobyov. Their horses were covered with foam. They had evidently ridden longer and harder than we.

Still, the chief sprang from his horse like a young man and strode towards the spring. His stout legs clad in soft abbreviated top-boots seemed to bend under the weight of his stocky body, crushing the tall, dense grass and crum-

bling the porous earth. He washed himself for a long time, pouring the cold water on his round, cropped head and then rubbed his face and neck with a handkerchief.

"Well?" he turned his protruding red eyes on Venka.

"There's still time," Venka looked at his watch. "It's after eight, twenty past. Shall we wait, say forty minutes or so?"

"We may."

"Perhaps we ought to have something to eat?" Vorobyov timidly suggested.

"Not a bad idea," the chief agreed and let himself down on the grass with his legs crossed under him, like a Kalmuk. "That's all we do: have something to eat or drink tea. There's been nothing to do so far."

"That's not our fault," mumbled Vorobyov with resignation. He loosened the knot on the food bag with his yellowed, half-decayed teeth.

The canvas bag was extended by means of rings and spread on the wavy grass as a table-cloth.

"Sit down, Malyshev," invited the chief with a generous gesture towards the bread and meat which Vorobyov was carving with a jack-knife. "Sit down, all of you!"

"Thanks," Venka declined. "I'll eat afterwards. I'll take a walk if you don't mind." He went off towards the highroad which was out of sight from this spot.

"I'll go too," Golubchik jumped up.

Venka stopped and looked reproachfully at the chief.

"You'll do nothing of the kind," the chief said severely. "Sit still and eat."

We settled around the meal, folding our legs like the chief had done. Venka disappeared behind some hawthorn bushes.

It seemed strange that the chief could eat with such gusto. I had quite forgotten that I was hungry. Where could Venka have gone? I wondered, watching the chief bite into a hunk of meat on a bone. What was going to happen in forty minutes? Hadn't Venka said "forty minutes?"

"Why aren't you eating?" the chief asked me.

"Oh, but I am," I said reaching for a tuft of *cherimsha*, dipping it into the salt, tearing at a piece of bread and stuffing all of it into my mouth. Still, I had no appetite.

After the meal, Frisky took me aside and pointed to the ridge of gently sloping hills. We could see cottages here and there.

"D'you see that roof, the silver one, I mean? You're looking in the wrong direction! Just look towards that fir-tree over there. D'you see it now? That's where Klanya lives."

At last, between the branches, I could see the zinc roof he meant. It was really shining in the sun like silver. It was not often that one could find such a roof in the taiga villages.

I was annoyed to think that it was Frisky who was showing it to me. Hadn't I been under that roof with Venka? Frisky had not ever laid eyes on Klanya Zvyagina, while I had visited her. I said nothing however.

"At nine o'clock sharp," said Frisky, "you'll see them raise a long pole with a tuft of tow on the right side of the house. At nine sharp!"

Now I was annoyed not with Frisky, but with Venka. Couldn't he have told me the plan of operations? A fine secret indeed, if even Frisky knew it! Perhaps he had not told me anything, thinking that I knew it already. As it happened, I knew nothing.

"What are you looking at?" Kolya Solovyov approached, his mouth still full.

"Frisky is admiring Klanya's cottage." I laughed to show that I knew all about it.

"Which cottage? The white one?"

So Kolya did not know anything either. It was outrageous! It was simply stupid. No one knew anything. How were we supposed to act? Everything was secret. We did not even know what we were to do when the pole would be raised. Why were we gathered here?

The chief was sitting on the grass with his back against a pine-tree. There was a cigarette in his fingers and his eyes seemed about to close, as though he were falling asleep.

But where was Venka?

A rifle cracked in the hills.

"It's begun," said Frisky hopefully as he seized the reins of his horse and forced the bit into its mouth. He leapt nimbly into the saddle, slipping his feet into the stirrups.

Iosif Golubchik and Kolya Solovyov ran for their horses too. The chief, however, hoisted himself up unhurriedly, leaning on one hand.

There was another shot, a third and a fourth.

Iosif Golubchik had drawn back the bolt of his carbine without turning the head of his horse.

"Steady there!" called the chief, brushing bits of grass from his trousers. "Keep cool. Nothing has happened so far." He approached his horse and threw the reins over its neck. His actions were unhurried, nonchalant.

"There's the pole!" Frisky sang out, unable to contain himself. He thrust out his whip. "They've raised the pole."

"Thank God," Vorobyov sighed. He would have crossed himself if his hands were not occupied with knapsack and carbine and if he were not too shy to make such a gesture in the presence of the chief.

There was a rumbling of carts and barking of dogs in the hills and we could even hear the rustling of chains and the scraping of the slide-rings riding the wires to which the wolf-hounds were fastened. No human voices reached us however.

Venka stepped into the open from the bushes.

"We've got him," he said and seemed glum rather than pleased. He was quite limp, not at all like the man who had left us an hour ago.

"Well, thank God!" Vorobyov sighed again.

Venka stood talking to the chief for some time, then clambered on to his saddle, awkward and lifeless. His cap sat on his head properly now, with the peak forwards.

The chief, on the contrary, grew tense and nimble, gripped the reins of his horse and began to drub the animal's sides with his heavy heels.

"Look out now!" he thundered. "We're heading for the highroad. And there's a special order for you Golubchik! Don't butt into anything without the word of command!"

We galloped on to the highroad and towards the hills in clouds of hot, suffocating dust.

A cart came rumbling towards us, drawn by a little shaggy horse much like Vorobyov's mount. Two peasants sat on each side of the cart, their legs dangling. A man with a blood-bespattered beard lay between them.

"Is he dead?" the chief asked Venka as he looked anxiously at the prostrate figure.

"No, it's not Vorontsov," said Venka. "It's Saveli Bokov. He resisted arrest. There was nothing else we could do. Kologrivov is wounded too, perhaps fatally."

"Who cares about them!" said Vorobyov. "May God forgive me for saying so. What roisterers they were! Worse than in the tsar's days!"

I was looking at Saveli's corpse. So this was the man in whose name we had been received by Klanya.

"He was once a non-commissioned officer," said Vorobyov. "I served in the same regiment with him in the German imperialist war. Stop that cart down there!" he called to the peasants. "Wait for me!" He sighed, his eyes on the cart: "They're also a pair of bandits, those men. It's only now that they seem quiet. I know them very well. They're the Spekhov brothers. Their father is a bandit too, though very old."

It was uncanny to see the pair of bandits carting their dead leader and taking orders from Vorobyov.

I looked back and saw them stop at the foot of the hill as ordered.

It was only on the hillside that I at last recognized our surroundings: there was the fence we had passed on skis and the barking dogs straining at their chains behind it. Now too they were barking. We rode on, reached Klanya's house and entered the open gate.

A handsome young man with a well-trimmed blond beard lay bare-footed on a cart, his hands tied behind his back, his silken shirt torn to shreds. He was breathing hard, his mouth open; his powerful chest with reddish hair heaved with every gasp. "Death to the Communists" read the letters tattooed on his breast.

"Look what he's written!" Vorobyov read the words. "Where were your brains when you had that put on, you murderer?" He wetted his fingers and



tried to rub off the letters. "Why, it's tatoood! You'll have those words on you till your death."

The bandit did not even look at the militiaman. He was staring into the pale blue, cloudless sky.

Big, well-fed horses champing their oats, stood tethered to a high trough in the depths of the yard, the sunlight playing on their mighty rumps. These horses had carried the bandits from the heart of the taiga and would have brought them back no doubt if things had turned out otherwise.

"Where should we put that one?" asked Frisky emerging on the porch and pointing through the open door at a figure lying on the straw in the passage.

"Is he dead?"

"Yes."

"Put them together," commanded Vorobyov.

"But that one's dead and this one's alive!" Kolya objected, approaching the cart.

"What does it matter?" said Vorobyov. "They were friends and they can ride together. They're going the same way."

The chief, sweating and angry, appeared on the porch. He had been inspecting the yard and the house.

"Stop that tom-foolery!" he snapped at Vorobyov. "You're a representative of what? Of power, that's what! And what does that imply?" (Vorobyov drew to attention, respectful and frightened.) "It implies that you should not talk nonsense! Let the one who's alive stay where he is and put the corpse on another cart."

The chief gave additional orders to Venka, mounted his horse and rode off with Frisky.

We stayed behind, apparently left to our own devices. There were five of us: Venka Malyshev, Iosif Golubchik, Kolya Solovyov, the senior militiaman and I. The yard was filling with strangers.

I was not yet able to tell who were bandits among them and who simple villagers. I did not even know what had actually taken place. Who had trussed up "the emperor of all of the taiga"? Who had killed Saveli Bokov and mortally wounded Kologrivov? There were many things I could not understand.

I did not recognize Lazar Baukin at once in the rooms darkened by drawn curtains. He sat at the table, still laden with bottles, glasses and plates of food, talking to Venka in undertones. They seemed to be coming to some agreement.

A woman sat on a stool beside the stove. Not a young woman, I thought. She was wearing a dark kerchief over her head as nuns do. When she tried to say something, Lazar cut her short.

"You keep quiet Klanya. That's the best thing you can do now."

It was Klanya and I had not recognized her! She seemed wasted as if by some illness and was not beautiful as she had been in the winter. How strange that I should have ever thought of marrying her on that stormy, troubled night!

"You, Veniamin, can set your mind at rest," Lazar said. "We'll do by you as you do by us. A man's word is worth more than money! We'll take you to the very place. I'll turn up in Dudari myself. Let them put me on trial if they like. My life is an open book. I used to belong to the band and there was not one among them who bore me a grudge. I hope you won't bear me a grudge for having wounded you in Zolotaya Pad."

"There's no need to go into that now," said Venka pushing aside a bottle and glass and placing his elbows on the table. "You'd better think about how you're going to live now."

Here they were, talking calmly to one another while the corpse of Kologrivov lay on the straw and Kostya Vorontsov was trussed up on the cart surrounded by strangers.

"It's all a haze, a haze over the whole of our lives!" said Lazar and rose from the table, setting the plates clattering. "What's done cannot be undone. Everything must have an end."

He noticed an officer's cap lying on the floor. "Whose is this?" he asked picking it up.

"It's his," Klanya faltered.

"Kologrivov's?"

"For the love of God! Don't you know whose cap it is?" she spat. "It's Konstantin Ivanovich's."

"Then take it to him."

"Take it to him yourself! You've tied him up and so you can take it to him."

"Sorry for your betrothed?"

"I'm not sorry for anybody. I'm sick of all of you, sick to death!" She turned on her heel and made for the door. "Just see how they've messed up the cottage. There's blood everywhere. Who is going to clean it up?"

It seemed to me that Klanya was trying to hide her feelings behind that petty outburst of household cares. She must have had her feelings. She wasn't made of stone after all.

I remembered the old man who had been moaning on the stove when we were here last and asked Klanya where he was.

"Grandfather?" she asked blandly trying even to smile. "But he died. In the winter. So it's you? I didn't recognize you in this bedlam."

There was not a trace of distress on her slightly swollen face.

"Give him the cap, Klanya, will you?" Lazar commanded. "And take his boots too. Are they his?" He pointed to a pair of smart, brown leather boots.

"Why don't you leave me alone?" And peering into Venka's eyes ingratiatingly she repeated: "Why don't they leave me alone, Comrade Chief? What have I to do with all this?"

"See what some women are like, Veniamin?" said Lazar. "When Vorontsov was the ataman she could not do enough for him. She even wept because she thought Lushka was ensnaring him, and look at her now."

But Venka said nothing. He seemed embarrassed in her presence and anxious to avoid her.

Only when we left the house, he looked back at the windows under the silvery roof and said: "All sorts of things happen, don't they!"

## 21

We could hear the thundering roars of bears' mating parties in the taiga even far down the highroad, when Bezymyanaya hamlet lay far behind us, but the noise did not seem so frightening now.

It was only I, perhaps, who could still visualize the fighting giants clawing at each other until their fur flew. Somewhere, near them, a beautiful she-bear would be sitting on her haunches, watching. She would fall to the victor, to the strongest.

Venka rode thoughtfully at my side. His face had a greyish tinge, as when he had been wounded.

"That was a fine piece of work," I said to hearten him.

"What piece of work?"

"This operation of ours. No one thought the 'emperor of all of the taiga' would fall into our hands so easily. Even the chief did not take to the idea seriously. If not for you. . . ."

"Stop talking nonsense!" Venka cut me short. "They would have done it without me. It was Lazar's work. He has a head on his shoulders, that man."

"Tell that to someone else, if you like, but I understand many things now."

"You don't understand a thing! Let's drop the subject."

It was said afterwards that Venka had been very clever at winning over the brutish Lazar and other peasants like him. Actually, it was not quite so. Propaganda was not enough for such people. Born and bred in the primeval forests of Siberia, they could easily have forgotten all propaganda and gone astray more than once if Venka, defying danger, had not followed them along the taiga paths, watching them at every step and reminding them of their common plan which they voluntarily negotiated with each other.

He had won over those hardened men not only by the strength of his convictions expressed in accurate, heart-felt words, but by the courage which lay at the bottom of them. He was a representative of Communism, yet had defied those whose breasts bore the indelible legend: "Death to the Communists!"

He had been wily, of course, oh how wily, but had acted in the name of the truth.

It was not for nothing that he had spent the whole of spring and a part of summer in the marshes, in sultry midge-ridden Voyevodsky Forest. He had scored a great victory, the greatest we had ever had, but was not happy somehow. He sat in his saddle limp and indifferent as before, his face tanned by the wind or darkened by I didn't know what.



The road led through the dense, monotonously murmuring forest, skirting the broadly rooted trees or cutting through the bushes until it struck the dusty, sultry highroad flanked with shaggy, flowerless *bagulnik*.

Vorontsov must have been cramped lying on his back under the hot sun. He had been motionless for a long time as if dead or unconscious. Only the beads of sweat trickling from his forehead to the eyes showed that he was alive.

At last he stirred heavily, bear-like, turned on his side and suddenly said loudly and almost cheerfully:

"I wish I had some kvass now, ice cold! Made out of bread and with raisins too." He groaned and again fell back.

Everybody was silent. Only Semyon Vorobyov who rode beside the cart sighed and said:

"You've had your kvass, Vorontsov. There'll be no more kvass for you or vodka either. You've had your seven fat years, now have your lean ones."

Vorontsov looked at him with his big horse-like eyes.

"Sorry I never got you into my hands, old fellow," he said thoughtfully. "I'd have made a fine drum-skin out of you."

"I'm sure you would!" Vorobyov smiled. "But it's not for nothing that donkeys have no horns. They would be dangerous if they had."

Startled from his reveries, Venka Malyshev edged his horse towards the cart and ordered the conversation to be stopped.

"Why are you pestering the man?"

"Then why is he pestering me?" retorted Vorobyov. "Am I a boy? I simply told him that he came to grief through a woman and had better keep his mouth shut."



"And you keep your mouth shut too," Venka advised, and then said to Lazar, glancing at Vorontsov: "Perhaps we ought to free his hands?"

Lazar who was riding a white-legged roan shrugged his shoulders, implying: "You're the chief and it's up to you."

"He'll get away!" hissed Vorobyov. "This is no joking matter. Untie him indeed! He'll be off before we know it. His companions may be all around us!" Apprehensively, he peered at the bushes stirring in the breeze. "They must have got wind of it already. You know what a band he has! And they're all mounted."

"Untie him!" ordered Venka.

The peasant on the cart looked at Vorontsov fearfully.

"Well, let me untie you, Konstantin Ivanovich. They're ordering us to untie you."

But try as he would, the peasant could not loosen the leather thongs.

"Give me a knife," said Venka severely to Vorobyov.

Vorobyov threw back the hem of his uniform and obediently produced the sharp jack-knife with which he had carved the meat and bread. He did not, however, stoop to cut the bonds himself, but handed the knife to Venka.

Venka bent from his saddle and, supporting himself on the cart with one hand, with three swift strokes sliced the famous leather straps with which Vorontsov's men used to tie their prisoners.

Vorontsov emitted a low moan. His hands must have grown numb. But then he stretched himself, raked some of the straw and hay under him and sat up. He put his cap on with the peak low over his eyes.

"So you're Malyshev," he said regarding Venka from under his cap.

Venka did not answer.

"Smart! That's all I can say!" Vorontsov regarded him keenly. "I've been

hearing talk about some Malyshev for a long time; since winter in fact. I've always wanted to have a look at you. I even sent some men after you. I wanted to see you very badly!"

Venka was still silent.

"Well, now we've met at last!" Vorontsov half smiled and looked about. "I'd like a smoke."

Lazar extracted his tobacco pouch, dexterously rolled a cigarette and proffered it from his saddle. Vorontsov extended the tip of the tongue to wet the edge to make it stick and took it between his teeth. Lazar struck a spark with a wick and stone and offered him a light.

"Eh, Lazar, Lazar," Vorontsov puffed at his cigarette shaking his head. "You're a real Judas, aren't you! I never suspected how much so!"

"No more than you!" Lazar's eyes narrowed angrily. "You know damned well which side your bread is buttered on. 'Emperor of all of the taiga,' you call yourself! Who anointed you? You're a dog of a kulak and not an emperor. The kulaks set you up to bully the people and muddle their heads."

Vorontsov regarded him with curiosity and even raised the peak of his cap.

"Not bad," he said. "Not bad at all. No worse than the commissar's talk at the meetings. You've learned quickly, haven't you!"

Lazar thrust back his home-made cap. Vorontsov's words had obviously struck home. He was embarrassed.

"No one has taught me anything. I can think for myself. Can't I see what's happening? The people are raising wheat, distilling tar and working, while you and I, Konstantin Ivanovich, go in for shooting scraps and keep people from their work or kill them altogether. And what for?"

"What for?" echoed Vorontsov and settled more conveniently, with his legs dangling from the cart. "You damn well knew what for until the commissars caught you. Until you cottoned to one another. I knew it at once. That's why I didn't want you around after you returned from Dudari. Not for anything in the world! If only Saveli hadn't been dinning into my ears." Vorontsov rolled his eyes towards the other cart. "Again and again he kept asking me: 'Why do you keep Lazar Baukin out of things. He's a good man and has been fighting for a long time!' For his gullibility the flies are eating him now. Just look at them crawling over his beard."

"They'll be crawling over you too before long," said Lazar rapping his foal's neck with the handle of his whip to keep the animal from reaching for the hay in Vorontsov's cart.

"Yes, they may be crawling over me too before long," Vorontsov grew thoughtful, but then tossed his head saying:

"Don't be too happy about it, Lazar! They'll never make you a commissar anyway. Why don't you open your shirt and show them what's written on your chest. It's the same as on mine. The commissars won't forgive those words. They won't, mind my words."

"I'll wash them off."

"With what? With my blood?"

"With yours or mine. What's the difference? There's got to be an end to it some time. I'm tired of this shooting game. Let it end one way or another."

Vorontsov fumbled behind him in the straw and drew out his boots. His footcloths happened to be in them. Having drawn on one of the boots, he smoothed the upper part of it, resting his foot on the crossbar, and then began to draw on the other.

"Then why didn't you leave us if you were tired of it all?" he asked Lazar with his boot half on. "Why didn't you return to your wife in Shumilovo? They say the commissars gave her a horse out of charity."

"And wouldn't you have given me trouble if I had tried that?" Lazar's eyes glittered.

"Don't know what I would have done about it," said Vorontsov drawing on the second boot. "I really don't know."

"But I do. I'm dead sure," countered Lazar. "Didn't I see you cut down Vaska Dementiev when he wanted to go to his wife in the village. You did it with this thing here." Lazar produced a long-barreled pistol of blue steel which had belonged to Vorontsov only two hours before. "That's how it is, Konstantin Ivanovich. If I had to tear myself loose, I had to do it roots and all, to destroy all traces of it."

Lazar kept riding away from the cart and returning again. Their suppressed and almost tranquil conversation continued all the way. Nearly everyone listened tensely, those on horseback and those riding in the carts.

There were some who had fought for Vorontsov that very morning and had been afraid of him, but now obeyed Lazar implicitly. Looking them over from time to time, as though to see whether they were all in place, he would exchange a few words now with one, now with another. He bore himself like the man responsible for the entire procession.

The white-legged roan which had once belonged to Vorontsov was now trotting sedately under Lazar. There was nothing majestic about the tall frolicsome foal except for the handsome long, tassled rug fastened over the saddle with yellow straps.

Venka and I rode near the cart which carried Vorontsov. He was lying calmly now, his hands clasped behind his head, the laquered peak of his officer's cap shielding his eyes from the sun. He must have resigned himself to his fate. There were no traces of agitation or grief on his broad white face framed by the blond beard.

Such a face could have belonged to a rich merchant, a prosperous inn-keeper or a young priest. Actually, it was the face of the ataman of one of the largest bands, a gang famous for their ferocity.

Lazar offered him another cigarette, but he declined.

"The stuff you smoke is awful. Couldn't the commissars give you some cigarettes for your work? They don't think you're worth it, I suppose."

I did not hear Lazar's answer because Venka diverted my attention saying:

"I wonder what answer Julia has written. She ought to answer by post."

Venka was not interested in Vorontsov or his conversation with Lazar. Vorontsov was a thing of the past. I recalled his words in the spring: "We'll attend to our personal affairs when we catch the 'emperor.' We're no worse than the others."

I also remembered the sultry night on the eve of the storm, when Venka wrote his first love letter. I had thought he had forgotten about it, busy as he was with our last complicated operation which was conceived and carried out almost unnoticed. Even now I did not know all the details. How did Lazar, whom Vorontsov had distrusted, turn up in Bezymyanaya Zaimka; how had he managed to tie up Vorontsov with the help of the "emperor's" own bodyguards even if two of them had been killed. And now Lazar was making the rest of them accompany Vorontsov on what was perhaps his last journey.

I could not help pondering over all this in those hours on the highway as we returned to Dudari.

But Venka didn't seem to be thinking about it at all. He was only wondering whether he would get an answer from Julia Maltseva, and just what she would say.

He didn't seem as confident, energetic and eager as he was before and during the operation, when he alone had held the brittle and dangerous threads of the bold scheme in his hands.

He hadn't talked to me as a pal in all this period, had asked no advice and had even concealed things.

But now his energy was gone. He seemed to be drooping as if ill, and sounded as if he wanted my advice.

"I don't know what I'll do if she does not answer. It will be ridiculous. I was sure she would answer when I wrote to her."

There was something plaintive and even pitiful about him. He seemed to be talking to himself.

"I wrote a lot that I shouldn't have. I could have thought it out better if there had been time. But I think she ought to answer just the same. If she has, the letter must be waiting for me. Of course it must."

So full of despair were these words that I began to feel for some reason that the letter had not come and perhaps never would. I was sorry for him, but said nothing.

Our friendship was a straightforward and manly thing, devoid of sentimentality, excessive candour or hypocrisy. If I had got into trouble, Venka, no doubt, would have done everything he could to help me, but he would never have expressed sympathy or tried to reassure me.

Everyone has his own idea about his strength. Everyone lifts as much as he can or cares to. To intervene with expressions of pity, reassurance and conjectures implies that one does not respect one's comrade and thinks him weaker than oneself. That was why I said nothing.

Besides, the moment for conversation was ill chosen. A crackling of twigs amidst the bushes, human voices and the snorting of horses were suddenly heard on both sides of the road. Vorontsov raised himself on his elbows.



"Lie down," Lazar said to him.

But Vorontsov did not seem to hear and sat up smiling.

Lazar raised his whip. "Lie down! Do you hear?"

The man sitting at the front of the cart looked back at Vorontsov with fear. He placed a hand on the ataman's shoulder carefully.

"Lie down, Konstantin Ivanovich, or we'll have to tie you up. That's quickly done, you know! Why make us shame you?"

Vorontsov looked over his shoulder as though trying to place the man. He couldn't seem to remember him, however, and turned away.

The crackling of the underbrush grew louder and drew nearer.

Venka turned pale. I saw his sun-tan grow grey and I must have paled too.

I was sure that these were bandits come to rescue Vorontsov. Instead, we saw mounted militiamen converging on the highway.

There were many of them and their smart new uniforms—caps edged with a blue stripe, and the blue tunics shining with buttons—stood out vividly against the dusty highway and bushes.

Vorontsov fell back, then sat up again and laughed unnaturally and painfully.

"So the commissars don't trust you overmuch Lazar. They've trusted you enough to sell me to them, but not enough to guard me. They've called out the militia, see? They're afraid you'll let me go."

Our chief came out on the highway. He had changed into a new uniform in Dudari. Riding a different horse too, he approached our group magnificently formidable, almost unrecognizable as he drubbed the lathery sides of his animal with his short legs.

Venka pretended to notice nothing and darted ahead to talk to Lazar who leaned over to listen.

Both turned their eyes on the chief and it seemed to me they were smiling contemptuously. The chief rode up to them, demanding to know what Venka was saying to Lazar. He must have been displeased with Venka's smile.

"Oh nothing," said Venka. "I just apologized to him for these antics."

"What antics? Do you consider the militia antics?"

"I consider that there was no militia about when Vorontsov was being taken," said Venka firmly and alarmingly loud. "These people here have done the job on their own convictions and we ought not to show that we distrust them, now that the thing is over. Are we cowards, afraid that Vorontsov might get away? In your place I would. . . ."

"When you get to my place you'll teach me," said the chief. "But for the time being, Malyshev, I'm your chief. You take too much upon yourself. Far too much! You may be sorry afterwards."

"All the same. . . . I would at least apologize in your place," retorted Venka pale with resentment. "At least to Lazar!"

"Am I to apologize to every kind of riff-raff?" The chief's light-blue eyes popped with indignation. Prodding Lazar Baukin in the shoulder he ordered

him to move on. "And you move on too!" he called to the others of Lazar's party.

Riding ahead, Lazar and his men found militia riders on all sides of them.

Lazar still had his riding crop and a sawed-off rifle slung over his shoulder, but looked like a prisoner.

I too was filled with resentment, perhaps the bitterest I had ever felt. Vorontsov whom we hated so much had turned out to be right after all when he had told Lazar that the commissars did not trust him and held him cheap.

But this was not true. Our chief alone did not represent that Soviet power which Vorontsov termed "the commissars."

What was to be done in the face of the chief's injustice, however? He was so majestic and formidable now—probably like Peter the Great at the Battle of Poltava. Even his bristling moustache added to the effect. But the battle was over, wasn't it? And it was not he who had won it.

"I'll go forward too if you don't need me," Venka said to the chief, with seeming calmness.

"No, I don't," snapped the chief angrily.

I followed close behind Venka and we quickly came abreast of Lazar and rode on side by side.

Lazar was gloomily silent.

"You'd do better to ride by yourselves boys," he said finally, a smile lighting his brutish face. "It's improper for you to be riding with me. You're not in uniforms and may be taken for prisoners like us."

"Let them take us for whatever they like!" Venka laughed.

That was the last time I heard him laugh.

## 22

When we reached Dudari, Venka and I rode directly towards the stables of the militia's reserve which was then situated in the suburbs, handed over the horses and walked leisurely to our office by now surrounded by the crowds who had heard of the capture of the elusive Vorontsov.

It seemed incredible! How many times had the gubernia newspaper reported his capture, but it had always turned out to be an idle rumour. This time he had really been captured and lodged in the brick shed in our inner yard, while the corpses of two of his accomplices, Saveli Bokov, and Gavriil Kologrivov lay on the wooden platform outside, in full view of Bogoyavlensky Street.

After dark they were to be removed to the hospital morgue.

The other bandits were locked up in the usual premises.

In the evening they would be transferred to "the house of detention" as the jail was now called in Dudari.

We gathered all this information elbowing our way to the crime investigation department. This was no easy matter. The people were pressing in like the floodwaters of a river.

We found Yakov Uzelkov in the charge room. He had already talked to the chief and now wanted permission to interview Vorontsov.

"The chief has advised me to speak to you!" Uzelkov nearly embraced Venka. "'Speak to Malyshev, my assistant,' the chief told me. But I would like to speak to Vorontsov most of all. It will be a grand scoop. There's some romance to it they say. Some Grunya or Klanya involved! Too bad you did not bring her too. *Cherchez la femme!* You simply must let me speak to him! I'll write it all up."

"Go to hell!" Venka threw him off.

"Veniamin!" said Uzelkov solemnly. "I beseech you by all that is sacred to permit me to talk to Vorontsov for at least five minutes. I beseech you on behalf of thousands of readers. And I think that on this occasion you ought to be kinder than ever because the chief said, among other things—that you're to be recommended for decoration.

Venka's eyes turned to slits.

"You and the chief can keep that decoration. You need it more than I do."

As we entered the secret operative section I told Venka that he ought not talk that way about the chief in Uzelkov's presence. He'd be sure to pass it on.

"I don't care," said Venka. "I'm not going to work in Dudari any more. I'll go to the gubernia department. I didn't intend to before, but I've made up my mind now because of the chief's attitude."

He drew his papers from the desk, glanced at them and began to assort them laying them aside or tearing them up, throwing the scraps into the waste-paper basket. It really looked as though he were serious about leaving Dudari and was putting his papers in order.

There was a knock on the door. Kolya Solovyov entered and said that the chief intended to recommend Venka for decoration, and not only Venka, but all who took part in the operation.

"In what operation?" asked Venka.

"Well. . ." Kolya was slightly embarrassed. "In this one of course."

"And where is Lazar Baukin?"

"The chief ordered him to be detained for a check-up," said Kolya. "And also those others who were with him. 'We'll look into their cases afterwards,' he said, 'perhaps we'll be able to get them amnestied.'"

"Do you think that's right?"

"What's right?"

"The fact that we are recommended for decoration while Lazar is put in jail for a check-up? What sort of a check-up can there be?"

"But the chief says he will intercede for him and the others." Kolya again seemed ill at ease. "You're the assistant chief after all. You know the rules better than I."

"The rules are that a man who wants to be a man should be respected for it," said Venka. "First you insult people and then intercede for them! Who needs your intercession?"

"Just a moment!" Kolya took Venka by the arm. "We have no right to let him go. He was under arrest and then escaped. The law does not allow. . . ."

"The law does not allow anyone to make a mockery of a man!" Venka flashed. "Lazar never asked us to let him go. He wanted us to observe the law. 'Let them try me, if I'm guilty,' he said. But we could have done it decently. Was it we who captured Vorontsov, or was it Lazar? Why should they be decorating us?"

"You're right, of course. I also felt that there was something wrong somewhere. You might think that the chief never forgave Lazar for calling him a swine."

"What if he did? He called him a swine, but then did this job for us. Who knows how long we would have been after Vorontsov if not for him? We couldn't have caught him so easily on our own, not likely."

As he left the room and went down the corridor Venka seemed slightly unsteady on his legs. I set it down to his exhaustion, to the fact that he had not slept for so long.

In the charge room he asked if a letter had arrived for him.

"Yes, there was something," said the man on duty and opened a thick folder. "No, there were no registered letters," he said shutting the folder. "But perhaps there have been unregistered letters. You should ask Vitya."

Venka's lips twitched. He wanted to say something, but changed his mind. Perhaps he was about to swear at the man on duty, but restrained himself.

Vitya, the secretary, finally came, unlocked the drawer of his table, rummaged about for a long time and then shrugged his shoulders.

"No, we haven't had anything."

"Perhaps it went to our home address," I suggested. "It may have, you know."

"It may," echoed Venka.

Having nothing more to do at the office, we went home. We were hungry and tired besides. The chief too went home for dinner.

But at home there was no letter either. Nor could we find our landlady. She had gone to pick berries, our neighbour told us, and there was nothing to eat.

"Let's go to Dolgushin's," I suggested.

"All right," said Venka in a flat voice.

"But perhaps you're too tired. Perhaps you'd rather not?"

"No, why not? What's the difference?"

His despondent voice worried me.

It was growing dark as we crossed the market, the short cut to the town park. The market square was empty. The stalls and counters were boarded up. Only the watchman and a young man with a pair of felt boots in his hand could be seen near a shed. We recognized Sasha Yegorov, the young fellow from the creamery.

"We thought you'd gone!" Venka's face brightened. I could notice it even in the twilight.

"No, I'm going tomorrow."

"Why do you need felt boots when it's so hot."

"I wanted to sell them. A man I know asked me to bring them to him. He may buy them."

"Haven't you got the fare?" Venka asked.

"I have enough. I just wanted to sell the boots, that's all. What's the good of them now? I'm going to buy some presents for my nephews."

"I'll tell you what," said Venka. "Don't go tomorrow. We'll go together one of these days and we'll buy the presents. I'm leaving too."

Venka seemed to be boasting about leaving.

This short exchange with Sasha Yegorov seemed to instill fresh hope in him.

"What if there's a letter for me now," he said suddenly. "They deliver the post in the evening too. Suppose we drop in at the office?"

We had to go back quite a long way and so walked down Marat Street, turned up Olshevsky Alley and emerged directly in front of Makhotkin's grocery shop where Julia Maltseva was employed as a cashier.

A huge rusty lock hung on the iron door under an electric bulb encased in wire netting. Julia had gone home.

The simplest thing would have been to go directly to her house together, if he was ashamed to go alone. Instead, he was waiting for her letter as though she lived in another town. There was nothing he wanted more than that letter. He simply had to have it.

Again, we found Uzelkov in the charge room and again he began to beg Venka to let him speak to Vorontsov. Venka, however, told him that Vorontsov was no toy and began to look through the fresh batch of letters which had just arrived and lay on the desk of the man on duty.

"I'm sorry, Veniamin, but you're a cruel man," said Uzelkov. "Don't you understand that I need this interview for work and not for play?"

"I understand nothing," said Venka without finding the letter. "Go to the chief. You and he understand everything very well, but I understand nothing."

"Now I see what sort of a man you are. No harm meant, but you're really narrow-minded." Uzelkov drew a book from his brief case. "Only today I read your letter by accident and was very much surprised. I'm not fond of reading other people's letters, especially love letters . . . ."

Uzelkov opened the book and an envelope slipped to the floor. Venka quickly picked it up.

I recognized the envelope. It was the one he had posted before our operation. How unfortunate that it should have fallen into Uzelkov's hands!

"Where did you get it?" Venka demanded.

"Don't stare at me like that. I'm not a prisoner yet. And there's nothing mysterious about it. I found the letter in this book, *Flame of Love*, which I had lent to Julia Maltseva. She returned it today."

Venka quickly glanced through his letter, then tore it up carefully and put the bits in his pocket.

Our chief entered the charge room at that moment and went for the key in the glass case on the wall over the duty desk.

"I want to speak to you Malyshev. Come to my office," he said as he left the room.

Uzelkov followed, but the chief would not let him in.

Venka came out in about fifteen minutes, perspiring and ruffled.

"Shall we go to Dolgushin's?" I asked. "It's rather late."

"Never mind, let's go."

He kept spitting all the way as though he had tasted something bitter. I asked no questions.

There was still a light in the Party and Comsomol town committee when we passed. The window on the second floor stood open.

Lida Shushkina, head of the personnel department, sat pecking at a typewriter by the window in spite of the late hour.

We paused as Venka asked her if Zurikov was at headquarters.

"He's not here," said Lida leaning out of the window. Her hair had been cut short after typhus. "He left last night on a mission connected with the two-week anti-distilling campaign. Your people have also sent someone."

"Is Zholobov here now?"

"No, he's gone too. Couldn't you've come earlier? Everyone's gone home. I'm here alone. The Party files are in an awful mess."

She continued to tell us something, but neither Venka nor I was listening. Venka looked so strange that I really thought he was ill.

"Well. . ." he said as if emerging from a stupor. "Let's go to Dolgushin's if you like. We might as well."

He seemed more composed at Dolgushin's. He carefully combed his hair before the mirror in the lobby, smoothed his top-boots, readjusted his tunic and entered the restaurant hall erect as always when in public.

A dark, snaky young man in a black suit and dress shirt was doing a tap dance on the boards of a small stage in the depths of the hall; he was flourishing a flashy straw hat and shouting a popular ditty:

*He's just a chicken,  
A broiled little chicken,  
But little chickens also want to live.*

He was doing his job conscientiously, the young man, skipping about and never faltering in the rhythm of his tap dance even with bended knees.

"He knows his job," said Venka without smiling.

Dolgushin caught sight of us only when we had settled in a corner.

"Welcome guests indeed!" He ambled to our table.

"What about some supper?" said Venka.

"And beer?"

"Yes."

"They say that Vorontsov has been caught?" Dolgushin probed, bending forward and peering into our eyes when the table was set.

"Yes."

"They say that the chief ran Vorontsov down and greatly distinguished himself. There was shooting too?"

"There was."

"There you are!" Dolgushin clicked his tongue gravely. "All's well that ends well, I hope?" He bent over us even more confidentially. "I can't help wondering what you intend to do with him. Shoot him, I suppose?"

"Yes," Venka answered mechanically.

"All's well that ends well, I'm sure. I thought you would have him tried first."

Venka was not listening and to clarify the point I briefly explained that it was our job to catch bandits and not try them. "The court will decide what's to be done with him."

"The court?" Dolgushin again stared and clicked his tongue. "All's well that ends well, I'm positive!"

"What ends well?" I asked angrily.

"Everything," said Dolgushin. "You've caught him and that's a good end, isn't it? Now there'll be peace."

Venka had two glasses of beer, but only nibbled at the steak. He kept drawing invisible figures on the table-cloth with his knife while I was eating.

"Still, how awfully unfair!" he suddenly exclaimed, rapping the table with the knife clenched in his hand.

"Yes, that was rather ugly of Julia!" I remarked for the sake of saying something. "And of all people, to whom did she hand that letter? To Uzelkov! He'll tell others, you can be sure."

"Nonsense," said Venka with his characteristic gesture, as though brushing aside what was inconsequential and petty. "That's not the point, not the point at all! I don't think it's Julia's fault. It was simply bad luck. It's just as my mother used to say in Ukrainian: 'The cock is punished for his comb!' I have myself to blame. But what else could I have done?"

"So your mother is a Ukrainian?"

"Yes," he answered tonelessly as if drunk, though he couldn't have been from two glasses of beer. Perhaps his shoulder was hurting again. That was quite possible. A wound may heal, but hurt just the same and even make one's head swim. I once had the same trouble.

"Don't you feel well, Venka?" I asked looking at him.

"I don't, of course," he answered filling our glasses. "What's possessed me to write that idiotic letter? But then, I'm not really sorry. What's done can't be undone."

"Perhaps we can do something to make Uzelkov keep quiet about that letter?" I suggested, sipping my beer. "Perhaps we could warn him?"

"It's not Uzelkov that matters!" Venka again grimaced with disgust. "I've done more talking myself than he will ever do. This Vorontsov case has got me down. I seem to have acted like a downright rascal, a scoundrel and windbag."

"But you've done a wonderful job, Venka! And you did it all alone. I mean, it was all your work. Even the chief is conscious stricken. That's why he wants to recommend you for decoration. His conscience is troubling him all right!"

The shade of a smile touched Venka's lips.

"His conscience might be troubling him if he had one. But, as a matter of fact, he hasn't. I realized it only this evening. Do you know what he wants? He wants us to report officially that it was not Lazar Baukin who seized Vrontsov, but we who seized him and Lazar and all the rest. Now is that what actually happened? Did you see it happen?"

"Of course not. I was even surprised. . . ."

Venka downed his beer and closed his eyes.

"I'm so shamed before Lazar that my ears are burning. Everything is turning within me," he said. "And so it would seem that I had been gabbing to them . . . like God knows who! It seems that I tricked them on behalf of Soviet power. How will I ever look them in the face? The chief, on the other hand, says that his action is dictated by a higher policy."

"What higher policy?"

"That's just what I asked him. What higher policy could there be and what was the good of it if it's for the truth that we are fighting and even laying down our lives? For the truth and nothing but the truth! And at the same time we resort to lies and deceit. 'How can I recommend you for decoration? What shall I recommend you for, if you don't do as I say?' the chief argued, but I answered: 'Don't ask them to give me a decoration, but an extra pair of eyes so that I can look at you without feeling ashamed.'"

Venka's voice was trembling.

"Keep cool, Venka," I soothed noticing that the people at the neighbouring tables were looking at us. "Have some more beer." I filled our glasses again. "We'll thrash it out somehow and find what's to be done. We're Comsomols after all and not a couple of. . . ."

"That's just it. We're not a couple of. . . ." Venka caught up my words. "But the chief has told everyone in town that it was he who did the job. That's why he intercepted us with the mounted militia. He's described it all to Uzelkov in the gaudiest terms and Uzelkov will write it up for the whole gubernia. We'll get our awards, while Lazar and the rest will be shot. What if Lazar was a bandit before, when he was a raw peasant and did not suspect what life could be? But afterwards he healed my shoulder with billberry leaves, shared his sheepskin with me at night to protect me from the cold and said that I was the first real Communist he had ever met, though I'm not even a member of the Party."

The tears welled to Venka's eyes and he was trembling all over.

"Don't Venka! Compose yourself."

"No, I can't!" He grew even more agitated. "I'm no lick-spittle! Never was and never will be!"

It was hard to look at him and in my bewilderment I bent forward to sip the foam off my beer. I did not swallow any of it, it seemed to me, just touched



the brim afraid to splash it, when I heard a short cry and a harsh moan right next to me.

I looked up. The blood was running from Venka's temple.

I didn't hear the shot. I only heard the heavy pistol hit the wooden floor.

Venka began to slip from his chair. Something went wrong with me at that moment. Instead of rushing to his side, I greedily seized my glass and drained the beer as if afraid that someone else would get it.

We were hemmed in by people on all sides. I drew the revolver from the thong under my arm and the crowd parted as I strode to the telephone.

I shouted something into the phone, but did not hear what, like in a dream. Still, I remember my words: Comrade Chief! Your assistant of the secret operative section Malyshev is in the park, dead. I'm phoning from the park." I cannot remember what the chief answered, nor what I did when I left the phone booth.

I only remember that the chief came to the restaurant, seized my hand still holding the Colt, took it from my fingers and for some reason whispered: "A fine place you've found for your shooting, you young stinkers!"

The whisper penetrated my consciousness and filled me with shame instead of regret. I was ashamed that it should have happened in a restaurant we Comsomol members held in contempt.

Then I was surprised to see Venka in that unnatural posture as they were carrying him through the door. His booted feet were dangling helplessly. It was then that I realized that Venka was dead.

The chief put me into his buggy.

"Stupidity is the costliest thing in the world!" he kept saying. "I've told you so many times, it seems to me."

## 23

At noon the next day I was busy taking over the office of Comrade Veniamin Malyshev, Senior Assistant Chief of the Secret Operative Section.

Venka's body was laid out at the club, but the chief did not permit me to go there, and I sat rummaging in Venka's desk, reading all sorts of papers. I was still in a stupor, as if after a severe illness.

The first paper that came to hand was a list of material evidence:

1. Leather straps, known for great strength and reliable knots.
2. A G & H shotgun capable of spraying a large area with heavy shot.
3. An American Winchester rifle known for its long range.

I recalled the winter, the trip on the aero-sledge, the ski-run to Voyevodsky Forest by night, the wet, chilly spring in Dudari, the first forest fires and the love letter that Venka had written all night.

It had all happened so recently, only a few days ago, but how far away it seemed now.

These papers covered with Venka's minute handwriting seemed to be getting yellow. I kept sorting them, as if trying to find the most important.

Vaska Tsaritsin burst into the room without knocking. As usual, he did not speak, but shouted:

"Do you know how it all happened? Venka was in love with her after all. But she disgraced him all over the town—and so he went and shot himself, the idiot."

As calmly as I could, I replied:

"You'd better get out of here or I'll. . . ."

Tsaritsin caught my meaning and left at once.

Rising from the desk, I went to the chief to report that I had not found anything among the papers that could indicate the immediate cause of his death.

I entered his office without knocking, as Venka Malyshev used to do. I was the acting assistant of the chief now and had the right to do so.

Still, the chief arose and shouted: "Why do you come barging in without knocking on the door?"

"Sorry," I said, deeply hurt, and turned to go.

But the chief detained me and I noticed that his glasses were misty, that his forelock always neatly in place was tousled and that his usually shaven cheeks were creased and covered with red spots.

I realized why he had shouted at me and dropped my eyes.

He returned to his chair and slapped the desk. "There you are!" he grunted.

I was about to make my report, but the chief again brought his hand down with a bang.

"There you are! What a man we've lost!" He sat staring at the palm of his hand as though it contained a small mirror. "What a man!"

My sigh coincided with the chief's melancholy grunt. "If he were only alive," he said distraught as his cheek-bones began to work, foretelling a tempest as always. "I would have put him in the jug for ten days, let him ponder there, the bastard, how one ought to live and work!"

I should have liked to tell the chief that he was himself to blame—in a way—for his assistant's death, perhaps more than anybody, but I was afraid to say this to his face.

But Kolya Solovyov did tell him when he was summoned, as all of us were, to ascertain the cause of Malyshev's death.

The chief first wanted to know if Kolya knew the girl with whom Malyshev had got himself mixed up.

"I do," said Kolya, "but he did not get himself mixed up with her. He just wanted to marry her."

"What sort of little lady is she?"

"She's not a 'little lady,'" objected Kolya convinced that the term was applied only to elements alien to the working class. "She's a member of the Comsomol and works as a cashier in the former shop of Makhotkin."

"I see," said the chief rapping the desk with the stubs of his maimed fingers. "If you can't tell me anything relevant you may go."

"I don't know how relevant it is, but he was very angry with you, Comrade Chief."

"What about?"

"He thought you wanted to make a sharp deal at the expense of Lazar Baukin."

"A sharp deal?"

"Yes. He thought you were going to say that it was we who caught Vorontsov and Lazar too."

"And what do you think of it? D'you think they captured themselves?"

"I too think that the whole thing is going to turn into a sharp deal."

"So I'm a sharper, am I?" The chief roared with working cheek-bones.

"Not a sharper, but..."

The chief did not give Kolya the chance to finish. His fist came down on the table with a crash as he ordered him to hand over his weapon. "Put it here! You're suspended from duty for ten days! After that we'll see!"

The news of his decision spread through the department like wild-fire.

All the Comsomols gathered in my room. There had been five of them before Venka's death, but now we were only four.

Kolya Solovyov told what had happened in great detail and added that he, Solovyov, would not leave the matter as it stood, but would go to Zurikov at the uyezd Comsomol Committee that very day or, if necessary, to Zholobov himself at the Party Committee. Did the chief think he was God Almighty?

"I've never heard anything so foolish!" exclaimed Iosif Golubchik staring at Kolya Solovyov with hot dark eyes. "If I were the chief and you told me I was something like a sharper I would not only have suspended you from duty, but put you in the jug as well. If you don't understand questions of policy, you'd better ask..."

And Golubchik proceeded to explain why the chief wanted to report the case not as it had actually happened, but as if it were we who had captured them all. The chief was not out to win fame. That would be petty and mean. He merely wanted to raise the prestige of criminal investigation in the eyes of the public and that was a political matter, of course.

"Just consider what actually happened," said Golubchik enumerating the events on his hairy fingers. "We had been after Vorontsov for more than a year, but could not catch him. The people were even saying that we were leading a parasitical existence. But we weren't working on our own. We were working on behalf of Soviet power. If they were running us down, they were running down Soviet power. The chief pointed this out to us many times. And now he is trying to raise our prestige and thereby the prestige of Soviet power."

"But that's rank counter-revolution," interceded Frisky. "Do you mean to say that Soviet power is such a wretched thing that it has to be white-washed and gilded?"

I was surprised. I had always thought that Frisky was the chief's pet capable only of echoing his words and actions. We had even made fun of him for cutting his hair the way the chief did: the whole of his head was closely cropped except for a bristling forelock. But he had his own mind, after all.

"Deceit will always be deceit!" he shouted. "Can't Soviet power do without it? What do we need it for?"

"You shut up!" Iosif Golubchik looked at him contemptuously. "Your turn to speak will come on the 32nd of the month. Don't you try to pin counter-revolution on me! And stop trying to brow-beat me. Those who've tried it are in the graveyard now. And those who will are not yet born!"

Iosif Golubchik spoke aggressively as always, but I noticed that Frisky's words had unnerved him. It seemed to me that Golubchik, who had been educated at a *gymnasium* and whose parents had had a business of their own before the Revolution was trying to prove himself the most "ideological" of us all. He was afraid to be reminded of his origin.

Still, I said nothing until he, carried away by the argument, declared that Venka Malyshev had been a coward.

That was too much. Venka had been anything but a coward.

"You leave Venka out of this," I said to Golubchik. "You'd better go back and finish at your *gymnasium*. Venka fought for the truth all his life. He was against deceit and fought for the truth. Nothing but the truth!"

"And where did all his fighting get him?" grimaced Golubchik, lighting a cigarette.

I was sure that Frisky and Kolya would bear me out. I knew that they disliked Golubchik as much as Venka had disliked him. But this time they said nothing.

"There's no point in talking about Venka now," said Kolya at last, looking away. "I won't justify him and I can't."

"But the fact remains that he was fighting for the truth and against deceit," I said.

"Yes, the fact remains a fact," murmured Frisky as if afraid to pronounce it. He looked around apprehensively. "Malyshev recommended me for membership in the Comsomol. I always respected him. But the trouble is that even the non-Party people now say that he disgraced us."

"That's right," agreed Kolya Solovyov. "If one fights for the truth one should fight properly. It turns out that he's deserted us."

They seemed to be supporting Iosif Golubchik whom they did not like, and not me.

Nobody in town knew the real reason why Malyshev had committed suicide. Just what the reason was I could not even say myself. There was no single reason, but several, though the people in town spoke only of one.

When I was preparing to go home towards evening, our secretary Vitya entered my office and sniggeringly said that some young lady was waiting for me in the charge room.

Julia Maltseva stood by the dusty window with her back to the door.

I did not approach her at once. I didn't want to speak to her at all and paused in the doorway. But she must have felt my presence.

"How could it've happened?" she said turning to me swiftly and that was all.

We felt the stares of the man on duty and the usual crowd: two women detained for profiteering, an invalid who was robbed when drunk and was not yet sober, and a little pickpocket.

I could not talk to Julia in their presence and led her into the corridor.

"Please wait here," I said sternly and re-entered the room to put away my papers.

Shoving them into their pigeon holes, I wondered how I should behave. She was one of the causes of Venka's death, inadvertantly perhaps, but still. Why had she come? The nerve of her!

I hoped she would go away before I was ready and spare me the conversation. I did not want to talk to her or even to look at her. Why couldn't she have gone to Uzelkov? To the devil with her! What if she were to mention my carryings-on with her? How I wished she would go!

But she did not. I heard her footsteps on the stone floor of the corridor. The chief might come out of his office at any moment. He had not yet gone home. I had been waiting for him to go off to dinner so that I could leave immediately after. What if he were to see her in the corridor and ask who she was and what she wanted. What did she want after all?

I had put my papers in order and stood by the window looking out at the street so gloomy in the twilight. Nothing would occur to me, and I went out and began to lock the door, wondering how to get Julia away before the chief came out. Yes, I thought it best to lead her away. And quickly too!

But I was too late. The chief emerged before I had locked the door.

"Are you going?" he asked.

"Yes, I was going to have dinner out."

"Have your dinner and come back at once. I'll need you in an hour."

"I'll be back," I answered expecting him to say something about the girl in the corridor. I could not very well tell him that this was the girl on account of whom. . . . But the chief passed without even glancing at Julia.

"I'm terribly sorry," she said approaching. "I see that you. . . ."

"Let's get out of here!" I cut her short, almost shoving her into the street.

"We can talk outside."

The street was lonely and windy. We could hear the fading rattle of my chief's carriage bouncing over the uneven road.

"I'm terribly sorry," she said again and was going to add something, but again I cut her short.

"It's too late to be sorry. And there's no need for it. What do I care for your excuses. Not a rap! What did you come here for?"

"I just wanted to say. . . ."

"Who cares what you wanted to say. You passed that letter on to that lousy Uzelkov!"

"But I did not." She gripped my arm. "How could you say such a thing!" She burst into tears. "I'll never forgive myself."

"Don't cry. It's too late to cry. The letter was in Uzelkov's hands and he used it to strike Venka to the heart."



Julia wept even more bitterly, clutching my arm as if to silence me.

From her incoherent words torn by sobs I gathered that the letter had got into Uzelkov's hands by accident. She had put it in the book *Flame of Love*. Uzelkov had come when she was not at home and the landlady had given him the book.

"I did not answer the letter because I was angry," Julia said through her tears. "I did not expect him to write such a letter."

"So Uzelkov did a low thing, but you were angry with Malyshev. Doesn't make any sense to me."

"I was angry with Malyshev because.... He was so honest and intelligent.... Couldn't he understand that I.... But you don't know what he wrote in that letter!"

"I do. He made an honest confession."

"But why? Why should he? Did he take me for such a narrow-minded person? Couldn't he understand that.... I was waiting for him to come...."

We were passing the Paris Commune Club, where Venka Malyshev lay. I was afraid that she would enter the club with those tell-tale tears on her face. Fortunately, she said:

"No! I can't. I can't look at him... dead. I didn't want him to die."

We passed the club, turned up an alley, crossed the square and walked down Victory of the Revolution Street.

We stopped at the gates of my house.

"Do you mind if I come in to see the room you share?" she asked.

She had said "share" and not "shared"—as if Venka Malyshev still lived here.

She stayed only for a few minutes, looked at Venka's narrow cot covered with a rough grey blanket, at the weather-worn satchel protruding from under the bed, and slapped his pillow to make it fluffier.

"I won't go to the funeral," she said as she left. "I can't."

Malyshev was buried in the depressing drizzle of autumn. Still, the entire population turned out on the main thoroughfare, Communism Avenue. All were curious to look upon a young Comsomol who had shot himself for love.

The procession was led by a band. Then came the coffin on the cart drawn by the best horses of the militia reserve. Then the grim personnel of our office in full array. The townfolk stared at us as if we were strolling actors. We walked on with heads lowered as befitted the occasion.

Tsaritsin walked at my side, sighing softly from time to time. Perhaps it was my nerves, but I had the impression that he was sighing because he was sorry for the new boots which he was wearing for the first time; they were now very muddy.

I felt like shoving him into the mud to make him bespatter not only his boots, but also his new tunic and wonderfully smart military cap with neat folds at the front.

No, there would never be another friend like Venka.

The procession passed the green trellised fence of the park. That was where I had often walked with Venka and where he had met Julia Maltseva and where he had shot himself. I looked at the carved wooden cocks on the gate and suddenly saw Dolgushin.

The sight of him was like a shock to me. I had almost forgotten him in the past days and there he was, standing by the gate, watching us march in the funeral procession of our comrade who had shot himself because of love, as everybody thought.

*Gymnasium* school boys once used to shoot themselves and the cadets too, and some young women had poisoned themselves with vinegar extract. That is how it had been before. And we had been saying that such things belonged to the old world and that we were Comsomol members and different.

I looked back at Dolgushin. He stepped from the pavement, evidently to join the procession.

Tsaritsin tugged at my sleeve.

"Wouldn't it have been better if he had been killed by the bandits?" he asked, nodding at the coffin.

Tsaritsin must have guessed my thoughts. That made me feel friendlier towards him.

The sun appeared when the rain stopped, but the trees still sprinkled us with large drops in the cemetery. The procession was winding through the trees to the spot where a fresh grave had been dug. We were followed closely by the townfolk many of whom were hostile because of alien propaganda.

There were far more of them than us, far more; we were hemmed in by them as we stood around the coffin. They were consumed with curiosity. We could feel their breaths on our necks. Perhaps Dolgushin was among them too? Perhaps it was his breath that I felt, but I did not look back.

"We are responsible for everything around us!" Venka had said. Yes, and also for everything after us if we were really Communists.

The coffin was open according to Russian custom. Venka's face was slightly turned to conceal the bullet wound. He looked very much as I had often seen him: his jaw was set as it always was when he was thinking hard. He used to close his eyes too on such occasions.

It seemed to me that he would suddenly get up, look around angrily and say that he had never died and never would, that it was all nonsense, that he had just played a bad joke on us to see what they would say after his death, that the philistines need not worry, because he was not such a fool as to commit suicide.

I felt so bad that I was ready to believe anything at that moment, even the most incredible things.

But Venka did not get up and never would. They were removing the planks from under the coffin and soon I heard the handfuls of earth falling on the lid which was now in place.

I walked among the luxuriant trees of the graveyard for a long time. The flowers bloomed lavishly in this fertile soil amid the tombstones old and new. The earth seemed to be breathing more freely after the rain and looked as if it were steaming. As in a vision suddenly I saw the cap of our chief emerge in the mist. It stood out in the haze among the branches! Tall, sharp-edged and quite new.

"You're not quite right," I heard someone say. "Suicide is not our method under any circumstances and certainly cannot be called a Soviet way of arguing."

I recognized Uzelkov's voice at once. I could see his white, fluffy cap, lower than that of the chief because he was shorter.

"Irresponsibility is the worst of vices," Uzelkov was holding forth, while the chief grunted profoundly.

The chief, perhaps was sincerely sorry for Venka, but would never understand how a subordinate could possibly disagree with him. Wasn't there an old established rule: It was the chief's business to give orders and the subordinate's to obey. The chief, for his part, could never be wrong, since he always acted in accordance with the single plan whose ultimate benefits no one could possibly deny.

"At the root of this melancholy fact, therefore, we find a gross political mistake," Uzelkov went on. "I would even say political tactlessness. And for this we cannot possibly forgive Malyshev. We should always look the truth in the eye. Don't you agree?" The lower cap jerked back under the tall one. But the chief's answering grumble was inarticulate. Perhaps he had not yet



recovered from the painful loss of a good man. It was not likely that he would disagree with Uzelkov, however.

Wasn't Uzelkov saying the correct words? And he was saying them on behalf of the highest power, using the solemn "we"! He had long acquired the right to say things on behalf of this highest power. No one dreamed of questioning his right just as no one could possibly suspect him of having been an accomplice in Malyshev's suicide. No lawyer would ever find a *corpus delicti* here.

He had not broken the law. He had only read someone else's letter found in his own book. Could such a little thing have led to such grave consequences? And then, how could that puny public man Uzelkov have killed the strong, self-reliant Venka Malyshev?

And yet he had! And there he was, walking from the cemetery bursting with dignity and infallibility beside our chief and making solemn pronouncements about courage and truth and about looking the truth in the eye.

The warm mist still clung to the humid earth, but I was cold, shaking as with an ague. I could not help thinking that if Venka could see Uzelkov now, he would never forgive himself his one moment of weakness.

All this happened many years ago. I may have forgotten very much about those far off days and it is even possible that I have skipped some of the most important details.

But I vividly remember how I felt the breath of the curious crowd on my neck, of the people in the small uyezd town where we had been the first Comsomols, and how buoyantly Uzelkov had strutted beside our chief.

And whenever I think of this, I live through that grim day again, and my sorrow, anger and chagrin are as strong in me as ever.

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